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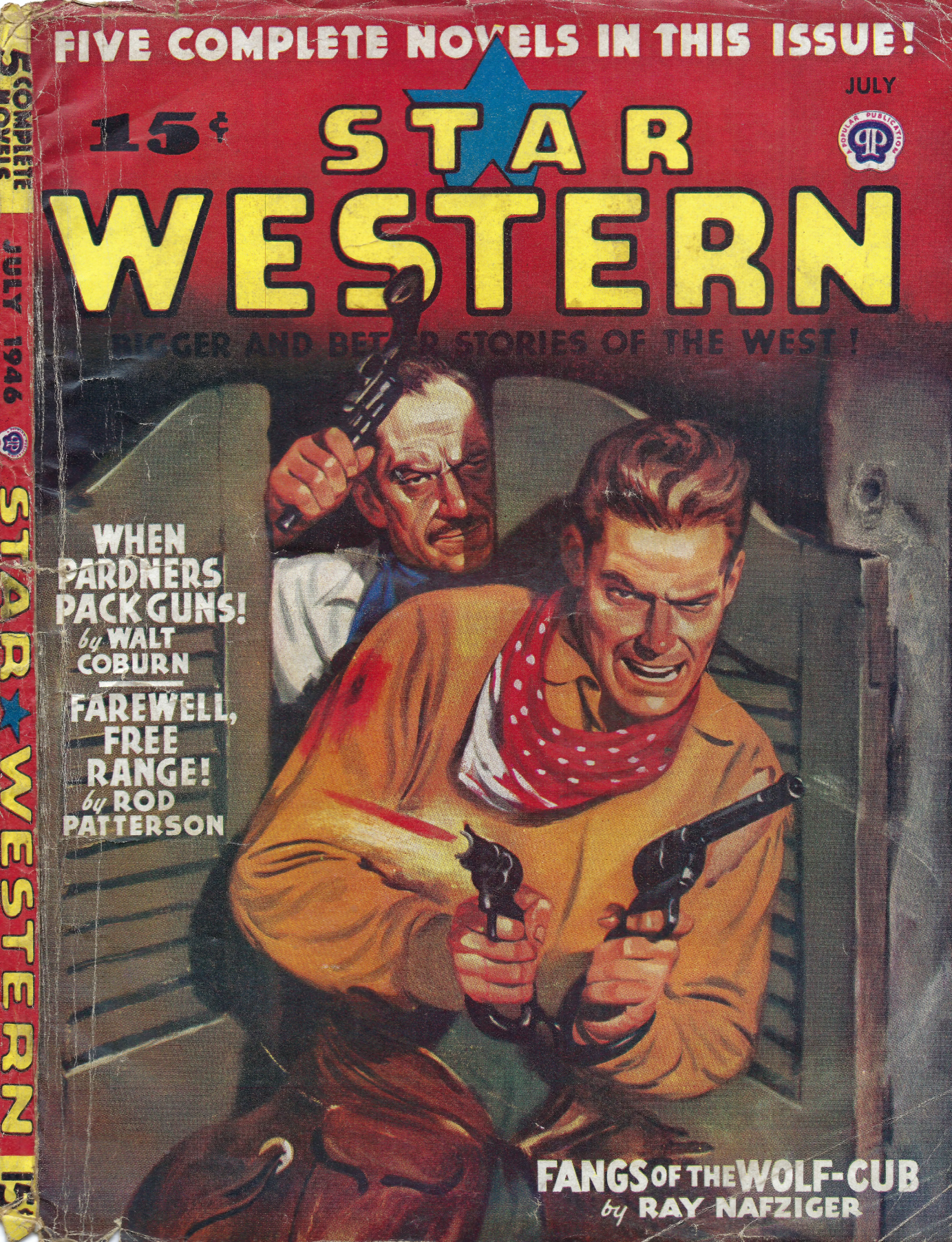

WHEN PARDNERS PACK GUNS! by WALT COBURN

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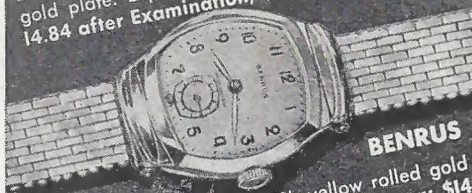

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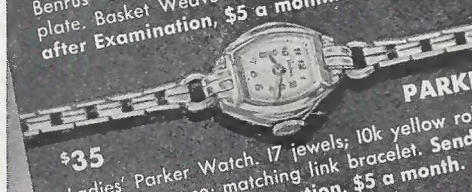

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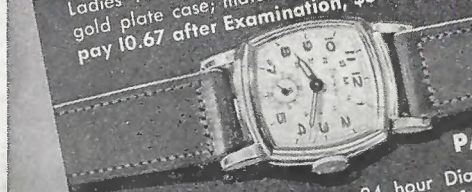

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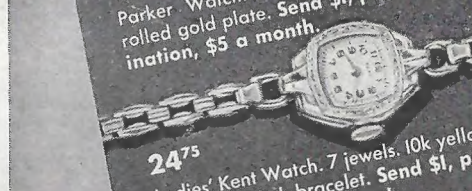

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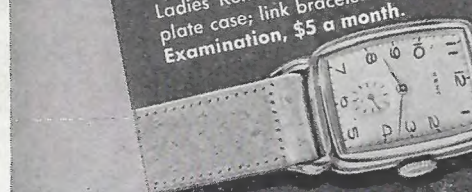

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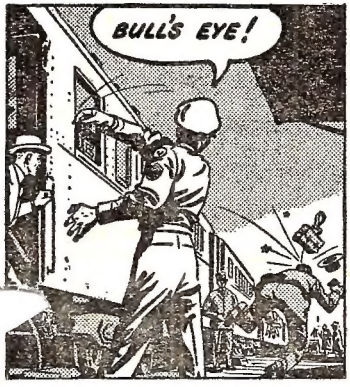

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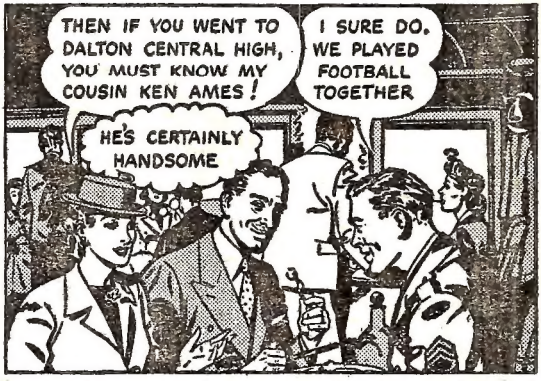
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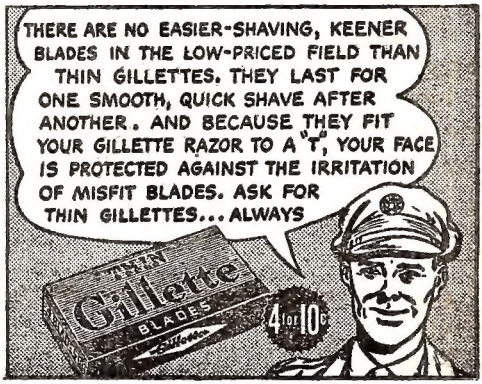
SHE'S A PEACH
SHOW UP WITH A THIN GILLETTE SHAVE, BILL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VOLUME THIRTY-NINE JULY, 1946 NUMBER TWO

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Liam Stroud knew he'd go back to the rock pile if he gave sanctuary to the "Kid Killer," Jim Richards. . . . Hard-headed cowman's logic, therefore, warned him to steer clear of that friendless fugitive, while his big rancher heart told him he'd be doubly damned if he did!

Stirring Novel of Two Who Fought Alone

CHAPTER ONE

A Hangnoose Beckons

JOE LAYBOLT, superintendent of the Monarch Valley Reform School, waited in his office for the institution's teacher, young Grant Springer. As he waited, he chewed savagedy on an unlighted cigar. He would settle this Springer, once and for all; fire him. Springer was a threat to Laybolt's soft job and salary.

The Monarch Valley institution, located on a ranch in a sheltered canyon, was an experiment in the handling of delinquent boys. With it went a sizable chunk of range, some hundreds of acres of irrigable land and a set of expensive ranch buildings erected by the former owner, a wealthy Easterner. The State legislature had purchased the ranch in the belief that boys would be reclaimed faster living a wholesome life on a ranch and doing outdoor work when not at their studies.

Unfortunately the job of superintendent

FANGS OF THE WOLF-CUB

By Ray Nafziger

He hoisted his arms shoulder-high.

had been given to Joe Laybolt, a politician ignorant of both boys and education. He looked on it only as a fat plum, and right now the teacher, Grant Springer, was threatening that plum.

Springer wanted the boys to attend school, while Laybolt wanted them to work, to raise produce and livestock which the superintendent could sell, slyly pocketing the returns.

Footsteps sounded in the hall now and Springer, tall and painfully thin, but with determined blue eyes glowing behind a pair of gold spectacles, entered.

Laybolt frowned and shifted his thick-chested, powerful body. "Shut the door, young feller," he snapped. "You and me's due for a talk."

"Yes, we're due for a talk," agreed the teacher, who shut the door and came to a stand before Laybolt's desk.

"My idees on these boys don't track along with yours," said Laybolt. "They been sent to reform school by courts just like reg'lar criminals, and we're here to learn the ornary hellions to behave, savvy, and not to run away like this Jim Richards kid. They're all headed for the penitentiary when they grow up anyway, and we got to treat 'em rough. I've had enough of your yammering for these boys to go to school. You leave their eddicatin' to me and Goler. We'll learn 'em plenty— mostly with a strap laid acrost their backs. That's the only kind of eddicatin' they need."

"I disagree," said Springer firmly. "Every boy in the State is entitled to schooling. It's late November now, and this fall the boys haven't attended school an average of five days. Some of the larger ones haven't even been inside the schoolhouse, because you're working them all day."

"They're in school while workin'," snarled Laybolt. "A open-air school, where they learn to dig ditches and build corrals and fork hay and to jump when told. That's better'n learnin' 'em to read and write. You fix your records to show attendance at school since September every day, savvy?" He glared at the teacher, but Springer's spectacled eyes did not waver.

"I won't do it. I've seen enough here, Laybolt. Too much. I know the treatment you're giving this Jimmy Richards—keeping him in solitary. Tonight I'm leaving—to raise a wind that will blow you right out of your job!"

Laybolt stared a moment, slack-jawed. Then a growl of rage came from his thick throat and he got up and walked around the desk. The muscles of his heavy shoulders were straining the coat seems. "You're— you're what—? By God, Springer, you'll never leave here to squeal on me. I'll chain you up and give you a taste of what Jimmy Richards is getting. But nobody would listen to what you say: The boys at the capitol are all my friends."

"The legislature is in session," said Springer quietly. "And the president of the senate, John Bronson, happens to be my uncle. He'll listen to me."

Again the growl came to Laybolt's throat, then without warning, he sent a big hard fist smashing squarely into Springer's mouth. The teacher staggered back, with blood dribbling down over his chin from his smashed lips.

"So it was Senator Bronson had you sent up here?" said Laybolt hoarsely. "He a'most kept me from gettin' this job. Damn you, Springer, I'll kill you!"

FILLED with animal-like rage, he followed Springer, who was staggering backward, weaving, trying to keep his feet. Laybolt's arm shot out and the iron knuckles slammed into the teacher's bloody jaw like a mule's flinty hoof cracking a man's shinbones. Then, as Springer began to drop, Laybolt hit again, a clout to the temple that had all the beefy superintendent's power and weight behind it.

Springer bumped to the floor and lay in a crumpled, insensible heap, blood running from his mouth to the carpet. His glasses, oddly, were unbroken.

He lay so still that Laybolt dropped to his knees to put his hand over the man's heart. It was beating, but that was all. Deadly panic seized the superintendent. Springer was a lunger who had come West as a health-seeker, and he was far from strong. That clout on the temple must have injured his brain.

Hastily Laybolt stepped to the wide front window to make sure that no one had been close enough to hear the blows. The nearest person was at a corral near the creek, a stocky, sandy-bristled rancher named Liam Stroud who had delivered a load of peeled pine corral poles.

As Laybolt glanced out, half a dozen boys who were lugging heavy posts to the corral site arrived and flung down their loads. Stroud stopped his unloading of poles to talk to them. A hardy-eyed, rough-appearing fellow, Liam Stroud, but what he said now evidently struck the boys' funny bones, for their boyish laughter rang loudly. Queer, Laybolt thought; it was the first time in weeks that he had heard a group of the school boys laughing whole-heartedly. He and his assistant, Goler, frowned on laughter.

Goler, called "Hog" because of his eating habits, yelled from the creek, ordering the boys back for more posts. Laybolt discouraged the boys from talking to outsiders.

Laybolt, sweating with panic, cursed and turned back to Springer. The teacher still lay as if dead, and Laybolt felt that the man was in fact as good as dead. Laybolt as a deputy sheriff had once been at a hanging and the memory burned in his brain now—the condemned walking up the gallows steps, the short prayer of a preacher, the hooded figure plunging into eternity.

His office, in the mansion built by the former ranch owner, had been a bedroom originally and there was a big closet in a corner. Laybolt glanced toward it. Dragging the teacher into the closet, he jackknifed the man's legs to fit in the narrow space and locked the door.

Laybolt's wife was away on a visit and the big empty house suddenly seemed lonely and sinister. Laybolt went out to the porticoed porch, thinking. He had a problem to solve—of how to save his neck from a gallows rope. And queerly, for all the brutality in the man, Laybolt wanted to hear a voice again, any voice. He felt lonely, the terrible loneliness of a man walking to a gallows.

He was headed for Stroud, who had just finished unloading the poles. Nearing the rancher, Laybolt opened his mouth to call a greeting but the sound that came out was a hoarse croak.

"How's it going, Liam?" Laybolt asked, following it closely with another question. "You been hearin' any talk in the valley about the School here?"

Liam Stroud, who was as broad-shouldered as Laybolt, turned his broad, sandy-bristled face and stared curiously at Laybolt. The superintendent did not realize that his face, drained of its beefy color, had a sick, bleached look, but he did realize that Stroud's gray eyes had a piercing quality. The rancher, in his early thirties, had a reputation in the valley as an unsociable, short-spoken sort.

"What sort of talk?" Stroud asked in his deep voice.

"Some folks might be sayin' we're too rough on the kids. Maybe even someone from the School said it, the teacher, Springer, maybe. Ever talk to him?"

"Don't know the feller," said the rancher. "Reckon you got a corral full of bronc kids here. I notice you fellers don't candy 'em much. They're allus working, an' real hard. A lot harder'n I see your men workin'," he added dryly.

"We learn 'em to work," Laybolt said shortly. "A lazy, bunch-quittin' lot. Allus runnin' away."

Stroud looked thoughtful. "Yes," he remarked, "likely to them this ranch is just like bein' cooped up in jail."

Laybolt shivered. If he escaped the noose, he might be cooped up for life.

"Kids is like men," went on Stroud, who seemed to have a talking streak. "Treat 'em dirty and they'll hate you like men. I just missed landin' in a place like this to be reeformed when I was a younker. I'd rode all summer for a rancher that welshed on payin' me my wages, and one night I figgered to take me a good horse instead. Feller heard me and sashayed out of the house to stop me. If I'd been packin' a gun, I'd 'a' shot him sure. No tellin' what a scared kid will do. Or a scared man either."

AS STROUD drove away, Laybolt stood looking after him thoughtfully revolving an idea, based on the rancher's words: "If I'd had a gun, I'd 'a' shot him sure. No tellin' what a scared kid will do."

Into Laybolt's head came an answer to his problem of how to escape a gallows rope. Muttering to himself, he walked toward a fair-sized half-basement stone building which the Eastern owner had intended as storehouse for root vegetables. Entrance was by a thick plank door. There were only two small windows, high in the end walls.

As he unlocked and opened the door the sunlight entered the place timidly, and when he closed the door behind him, almost complete darkness shut down. The place was musty and dankly cold; the dirt floor was damp. Laybolt lighted a match, located a kerosene lantern on a box and touched the match to the smelly wick.

The lantern showed in a far corner a boy, his ankles shackled and connected by a chain to a huge staple set in the stone wall. The youngster was fourteen-year-old Jimmy Richards, doing punshment in this cold, dark building for running away. He was dressed in ragged jeans and torn shirt, revealing livid welts in the white flesh of his back. Dirt covered the thin boyish face. A heap of straw served as bed; a single quilt for covering.

"Well, Jim," Laybolt said, giving his voice a false warmth, "how you feeling by now, boy?"

The boy glared defiantly for answer and Laybolt went on: "We hate to do these things, Jim, but you boys got to realize what happens when you break laws. Running away is breaking a law at this school. Runnin' off a second time calls for your stayin' in this place a lot longer'n you been here, but I figger you've learnt your lesson. Promise to behave yourself and I'll let you out."

Still the boy said nothing, but his eyes were openly defying Laybolt. Unconsciously, Laybolt knotted a hard fist but managed to keep his temper. "I'll turn you loose now," he said, "and you go wash up and put on some other clothes and eat a good supper."

Producing a key ring, he unlocked the shackles from ankles that had been rubbed raw by the chafing steel. The boy went out into the sunlight, staggering weakly as the light hit him.

Laybolt returned to his office and opened the closet door. Springer lay, his breath and pulse equally weak. Experimentally the superintendent kicked the man's ribs. There was not even a groan. The teacher was far gone. Laybolt doubted if he'd live until midnight.

Locking the closet, he stepped to a front window. Two of the employees at the institution were below, the assistant superintedent, Hob Goler, and Les Beech. Both were cheap politicians, owing their jobs to Laybolt, men of fifty or so, lank fellows, with a natural liking for cruelty.

Laybolt signaled to them to come to his office. He'd need the pair in solving the problem of saving himself from the gallows. As he watched the two come toward the house, the sun sent its last rays over the canyon ridge, turning floating clouds to gold. Then it dropped into a cloud bank, and beyond the canyon mouth Monarch Valley became one vast shadow.

Joe Laybolt, however, saw none of the beauty of the evening. He was seeing himself in a courtroom, on trial for his life. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Grub-Bait for a Fugitive

LIAM STROUD, driving home from delivering his load of corral rails to the Reform School, was reading storm signs in the clouds sweeping in from the northwest. A hard storm, he guessed, and turned his thoughts back to the School. He had delivered feed, poles and a few cattle to the place. He had always been glad to get away. It reminded him too much of a prison, and Liam Stroud did not want to be reminded of prisons.

Doing his chores and cooking supper in his one-room log cabin, the rancher thought constantly of Joe Laybolt and the Reform School. He was the closest neighbor to the institution, which had been opened only a few months previous. During those months Stroud had been more troubled than he admitted to himself. Talking to the boys, harshly treated, none too well fed, had always stirred him; made it difficult for him to sleep the nights after his visits. Laybolt had made a prison of the place, and boys shouldn't be in a prison. Always the men guards were over the boys, cursing them, ordering them to harder work. A mean bunch of men in charge.

Not that it was any of his business. He had learned his lesson the hard way: It was everybody for himself in this world, particularly for Liam Stroud, who had served seven long years in prison for shooting a man. He had wanted to forget those years and all of his past, but tonight it came back to him full force. He had been a boy of eighteen, not much older than the boys at the Reform School, when he had been sent to the State penitentiary.

Young enough to know that a boy penned up suffered just as much as a man. Maybe more, for a man got hardened by the grind of flinty years. The boys at the School were getting hardened; it showed in the sullen thin faces of the ones he had talked to that afternoon. Every time he had seen any of them, Liam had spoken to them in a jesting, kindly way. Sometimes he thought maybe he was the only man who had talked kindly to those boys.

They weren't his kids, however, and hence no responsibility of his. He had no children. He had married after he was released from prison, but his wife had died and their infant son with her. After that Liam figured simply that his life was not intended for him to be lived as more fortunate men lived theirs.

Pulling off his boots on the bootjack under his bunk, he was still being bothered by the School. A man like Laybolt shouldn't be in charge. Maybe Sheriff Tom Byers at the county seat, Two Springs, ought to be told about conditions there. Byers was one of Stroud's few friends. Liam had, on coming to Monarch Valley, told Byers his history in confidence and his story of the death of the man he had been sent to prison for killing. Byers was a square-shooter; maybe he could investigate the School, even if it was a State institution.

He slept poorly that night, and getting up before daylight, found several inches of snow on the ground. Looking at the leaden sky, Stroud had a hunch the storm would be a bad one. The hunch was strong enough to make him decide to climb the mountain part of his range to hunt several cows that had dropped late calves. Until the weather cleared they'd be safer in his corrals. He rode out on a blue roan horse, heading for the district in which they ranged. By noon, however, he had not found them. Mountain-raised, and wise to storms, the cows must have left the high country before the snow.

Continuing his search, he rode out on points for a look-see and was surprised to catch glimpses of a dozen scattered riders and a few team-drawn rigs moving about his end of the valley, in the vicinity of Snake Buttes. He wondered what was causing all the activity. Something else puzzled Stroud a little later as he rode down Del Norte Canyon.

Scanning the rocky snow-covered slope for his strays, his eyes were caught by a flash of red. It was too bright a red for the hide of a cow or horse.

Locating his cows and calves finally, he was driving them down Esperanza Canyon when he met three riders. Superintendent Laybolt from the Reform School; his assistant, Hog Goler; and another employee.

Stroud's hackles rose involuntarily as Laybolt reined up. That hombre wasn't fit to look after a flock of chickens.

"Seen anything of a stray kid, Stroud?" Laybolt asked. "Ain't exactly a stray kid, either, considerin' what he did when he got away," he finished solemnly.

Hog Goler, riding a big dun beside Laybolt's bay, wagged his head gravely. The third man followed suit.

"Have you fellers just come from a funeral?" Stroud demanded irritably. "What did the boy do when he got away?"

"SHOT and killed our teacher, young Springer," said Laybolt. "In cold blood. This Jimmy Richards hellion had run off twicet before, and I kept him locked up until yest'day. Turned him loose just after you delivered those poles on his promise not to run off again. But what does he do, come night when he's finished work in the kitchen, but steal a six-shooter out of Goler's room and a horse and saddle outa the barn. The way we figger it, the teacher must of seen him start to ride away. Anyway the teacher yelled to him to stop. I heard him from the office; he yelled just below my house."

"Me, I heard him too," put in Hog Goler.

"Yeah. Goler was in the office with me. Next we heard a shot and then Springer yelling, 'Don't shoot me, Jimmy; it's Springer, your friend.' The kid shot again anyhow, and we c'd hear the boy ridin' off through the brush. Then me and Goler run down and found Springer layin' dead."

"Stone dead," said Hog Goler solemnly. "Shot right through the heart. Mighty accurate shootin', considerin' it was dark."

"I sent a man to notify the sheriff and coroner," went on Laybolt, "while me and Goler started trailin' the kid by usin' lanterns until the snow come and turned us back. The horse the kid took has a ringbone and goes lame when he's ridden. A long-legged sorrel with a blaze face. While the kid's a good rider, we know he couldn't of traveled far. Circling this mornin' after the inquest we found the sorrel near Snake Buttes, plumb lame, but no trace of the kid. He headed som'ers afoot but the snow must of covered his tracks. We figger he headed for the mountains. He was wearin' a bright red sweater."

Stroud started. The sweater explained the puzzling glimpse of red he'd caught that afternoon in Del Norte. That red had been the runaway boy, on a slope just above the Injun Overhang, so called because of an overhanging cliff beneath which lay the ruins of some old Indian stone houses.

"How about helping us hunt, Stroud?" asked Laybolt.

"Got to take these cattle to the ranch," the rancher said gruffly. "Bad storm due tonight."

"But huntin' this killer kid is a duty," argued Laybolt. "He's dangerous. Shootin' at that teacher was the dirtiest, coldest-blooded killin' I ever heard of. If that ornary little polecat goes to some ranch, mebbe he'll use that gun to kill somebody else, a woman even. Sheriff Byers says he's got to be corraled quick. Byers and Deputy Ake Madden taken some men to sweep the lower end of the valley, figgerin' he hit for some ranch to steal a horse. But me and Hog is certain he come toward the mountains. That's where he headed the other times he run away."

Stroud's gray eyes sharply studied the men. He couldn't explain just why he held back from telling the trio about the red spot he'd seen above Injun Overhang. Partly it was because of his dislike for Laybolt, but mostly it was because the trouble that the fugitive lad had gotten himself into was similar to trouble Stroud himself had once been in. Years before he too had been a fugitive from the law; to tell about the boy somehow meant a kind of betrayal. "Got to go on," he said shortly.

Laybolt looked up as a few small flakes of hard snow fluttered from the sky. "Storm bustin'. Got to give up the hunt for tonight. That kid won't get far in a storm."

"It's turnin' cold too," said Goler. "Likely he'll freeze tonight. Hope so."

"I offered a reward of a hundred dollars," said Laybolt. "Bring him in if you see him. He's small for fourteen, blue eyes, black hair—coal black. Wearin' a red sweater."

"A thin sweater," added Goler. "And don't forget he's got a gun and is vicious as a rattler. Don't take no chances; shoot him 'fore he kin shoot you."

The trio turned to ride off along the back trail, while Stroud drove his little bunch of cattle on to the ranch, reaching it as snow began to fall in earnest. Two of his saddle string had come in from pasture, a black and a bay gelding, the black his best horse. They were nickering hungrily and he stabled and fed them corn. Carrying stove wood and water to his cabin completed his chores. By then it was dark and he lighted an oil lamp.

LIAM STROUD'S mind was busy again as he built a fire in his cook stove. It drifted back to the night he had decided in a rage to

steal a horse to make up for wages he had been promised but hadn't received. He remembered telling Laybolt about the incident and saying that if he'd had a gun he'd have shot the rancher. It was a sort of queer coincidence that a Reform School boy had shot a man that very night.

It was odd also that the boy had ridden away on the ringboned long-legged sorrel which the School had bought from one of Stroud's neighbors. Stroud knew the horse well; he'd travel for an hour or so and then go badly lame. The kid had made a bad blunder in picking a crippled mount for a getaway; if he was a good rider, as Laybolt claimed, he'd surely have taken a better mount.

Peeling and slicing potatoes, he cut a thick steak from a quarter of beef hung in a lean-to shed and kneaded sourdough for biscuits. It seemed queer, too, that Laybolt's party had been riding boldly out in the open, their rifles in their scabbards, just as if they were chasing a cottontail instead of an armed kid on a rampage. Several things appeared queer about the whole affair, but of course it was none of his business.

Turning the sputtering steak in the skillet, he cursed. There was building up in his mind a sympathy for Jim Richards, who had killed a man and was a murderer at fourteen. Liam, putting himself in the place of that boy, saw only a panic-stricken kid who had shot in terror and desperation, and oddly, so well on a dark night that he had hit a man in the heart.

He opened the door and looked out. It was snowing hard now and at the same time getting a lot colder. The wind that was rising cut like a knife, cold enough to freeze a kid with little clothing, through and through, and with maybe no matches to start a fire.

"Gawd a'mighty!" Liam Stroud said aloud. "It's no funeral of your'n what happens to him. More'n that, it might go hard with you if you mixed in it. You're on parole, with only seven years of a fifteen-year term served."

After eating supper with countless cups of strong coffee boiled in the granite coffee pot, Liam tilted his chair back against a wall and smoked. His pipe didn't give him its usual satisfaction, and knocking it out half smoked, he got up to wash the dishes, all the while thinking of Jim Richards. A half-starved dogie kid without food or fire couldn't last out this storm. And if Laybolt's crew found him, he had a hunch the boy wouldn't live to tell his story. There was more to the Springer killing than Laybolt and Goler had told.

An extra strong gust of wind blew open the door, letting in deadly cold and swirling snowflakes. Again he stuck his head out. This storm might last several days. Killer or no, the boy needed to be brought in out of it.

"Gettin' foolish an' crazy," Liam told himself. "Worryin' about a maverick kid that up and shoots a feller. And anyways a hundred men couldn't find him up on that Del Norte slope tonight."

ANOTHER cup of coffee brought a scheme, one that made him chuckle. Down in New Mexico Sheriff Pat Garrett had once lured Billy the Kid out of a cave where the Kid had forted up by the use of food as bait. Grub would be a powerful bait for the hungry, half-frozen fugitive. Likely he'd have been afraid to shoot game, even if he'd seen any, for fear of bringing pursuit down on him.

He growled to himself for a minute louder and louder, and finally threw a coffee pot, a skillet, a filled canteen and some grub into a gunny sack. Then putting on a heavy mackinaw and bullhide chaps, he lighted his lantern and picking up a wool blanket and the grub sack, headed for the stable.

There, still swearing at himself for a damn' fool, he saddled black Nig, stoutest horse in his string. Tying on the grub sack and blanket, he rode out into the storm. Nig snorted and started to pitch and then changed his mind. His rider was plainly in no mood for foolishness.

Out of the valley, he headed into Esperanza Canyon, to climb a ridge and drop into neighboring Del Norte in which lay the Injun Overhang, in a high amphitheatre of cliff. Nearing the place, he let Nig pick his way through the rubble to the Overhang—a high-mouthed cave. There Stroud dismounted and tied the black to a cedar growing out of the fallen walls of an old stone Indian house. Fairly well protected from wind and storm, it was also a spot from which a fire's glow would be seen from any part of the opposite slope where he had had the glimpse of bright red that afternoon.

Finding some small dead cedars, he broke them to pieces and built a huge fire. Up-ending the grub sack, he slapped a slice of steak in the skillet and filled the coffee pot from the canteen. A dozen biscuits were laid on a rock near the fire to warm; beside them he put an opened can of peaches.

Then, filling his pipe, Liam folded the wool blanket against a rock and leaned comfortably back against it to await results on Sheriff Pat Garrett's scheme of baiting for a fugitive with grub. The fire might scare away the boy instead of drawing him. If he were drawn to within smelling distance of the grub, however, it was a cinch Jim Richards would come the rest of the way.

He turned the steak, drank a cup of the coffee. A half-hour passed with only the

subdued roar of the wind in the canyon bottom, then he heard the faint reverberation of a stone rolling down a slope not far away. That stone might or might not have been dislodged by the boy. Encouraged, he shifted the meat skillet to a hotter spot so that the steak sputtered angrily. He was fishing for a boy and his bait was out.

Stuffing his pipe full again, he smoked and waited. If the boy was coming nearer, he was making no noise at it. Either he was good in Injunin' up, or else he had gone away.

Then, without warning, a voice came from behind him, from among the ruins of Indian houses farther back under the Overhang, a boy's voice, hoarse and filled with threat.

"Put up your hands, cowboy!" the boy ordered. "I'm holdin' a gun on you and I'll blow a hole in your back if you make one wrong move!"

CHAPTER THREE

Nurse for a Bronc Button

LIAM was shocked. He had been outmaneuvered by the kid and the result might be serious to him. He wondered if the kid had his finger on the trigger of the pistol he had carried off from the School.

He hoisted his long arms shoulder-high. "I'm plumb peaceful, Bub," he rumbled. "You're welcome to a bait of grub. I didn't bring no gun with me."

"That's what you say," came the boy's hoarse voice. There was a pause during which Liam could hear loud, rasping breathing. "An' I s'pose you'll tell me next you don't know I run off from the School and that you ain't out here huntin' me? Keep your back to me if you don't want a lead slug in it."

The boy was in the dark shadows, Stroud guessed, where he'd be out of sight even if Stroud risked turning. A smart youngster, and plenty hard. Stroud figured he might roll behind some rocks and get the boy to empty his gun in shooting wildly. After which the rancher could corner him. That scheme however had a lot of holes in it, and one hole might be in Stroud's hide. He'd try talk first.

"Reason why I'm here, Bub," he went on, "I figgered mebbe to help you a mite. You're mired in quicksand good and deep. That teacher feller you shot at last night, you killed him. And there's a reward out for you."

Again the hoarse breathing of the boy came. "And that's why you're out here, Mister; you're wantin' that reward," he accused Stroud hotly.

"If I wanted that reward, I'd tell you you'd missed Springer to get you to give up. I don't need that money. I figger you got a poor deal at that School or you wouldn't shoot somebody to git away. You come to my ranch and I'll take you in to Sheriff Byers. He's honest and smarter'n ary trained seal. Why don't you sashay up to this camp fire, swaller some hot coffee and chaw on a little meat and then come along with me to git outa this storm?"

"You go to hell," returned the boy and went through a spell of deep coughing. "I ain't that easy fooled. I've seen too many lyin' men. Why should you want to help me?"

Stroud considered it a minute. He had asked himself that very question. "I dunno, Bub," he said frankly, "why I rode out here in this cussed storm to help you. Mebbe it's account I don't like to think of a fool kid like you freezing t' death. It plumb spoilt my supper. You're in a tight, but you can trust Sheriff Byers. He plays 'er square, Byers does. To him a man ain't guilty till the courts say so. He'll see that folks hear your side. That feller you shot, mebbe he deserved shootin'."

The boy spoke up. "No; Mr. Springer was the only decent man in School. He was one all-right hombre."

"But Laybolt isn't?" asked Stroud. "To my mind he ain't no more fit to run that place than a razorback hawg. I'll tell you something, Bub. When I was a button, I woulda shot a feller one night if I'd had a gun. Not havin' no shootin' iron—that's the only difference 'tween us. You come along with me now and tomorrer reel off your yarn for Byers. A lot of folks will feel plumb sorry for you, knowin' the way you was treated at the School."

"I don't want no one to feel sorry for me, dammit," snarled the boy. "I'll tell nobody nothin'."

Stroud shrugged. "All right, Bub. And I reckon you aim to take my horse and ride out of here, leavin' me afoot."

The answer came quickly. "No, Mister. In this storm I couldn't ride far enough to do me any good. I'm not leaving this country. I know I'm sure to be caught some time, but before that I aim to settle with Laybolt and Goler some way. I don't want your horse; all I want is your grub and for you to ride outa here."

Stroud grunted. "Just as well you decided not to take that black," he said. "Nig would've throwed you higher'n a bald-headed eagle's nest. The fire and grub's yours. Enjoy 'em both. Far as I know, nobody's huntin' you up here tonight. If you're too knot-headed to take help, it's your funeral."

"It's my funeral," agreed the kid grimly. "And it'll be yours, Mister, if you don't keep riding outa here. You won't collect no reward on me. Get moving, and don't look back."

A half chuckle came from the rancher. "Lissen to the way the button hands me orders," he muttered to himself, half-admiringly.

GETTING his horse, he rode out into the snow. He didn't stop; he was taking no chances. The snow particles were getting hard and sharp and the wind was increasing in strength. It sized up for a blizzard, maybe a short one this early in the winter, but bad enough while it lasted. The boy, he guessed, would be afraid to stay by the fire, afraid it would be a trap. Yet if he left the fire, he'd be a goner. One blanket wouldn't be enough for sleeping out on a night like this.

The boy's coughing and wheezing breath had sounded as if the boy was mighty sick. No wonder, rambling around half-clothed in the storm. Liam wished he'd tried to grab the kid, after going to all the trouble of luring the boy to a fire.

He swore again. It would serve the button right if he froze, but danged if he'd let him. A hundred yards from the fire he tied his horse in the lea of some pines and slogged back up the canyon afoot, keeping to the brush. The kid, he opined, would be too busy wading into the grub to keep a lookout.

Coming close to the Injun Overhang, it was now the rancher's turn to start creeping up on the boy as the boy had crept up on him. Looking like a shaggy bear in the snow, he crawled through the rocks until he neared the zone of firelight, where he raised his head cautiously.

The boy crouched close to the flames, bent head pillowed into his folded arms. Exhausted, lulled by the warmth, he had fallen fast asleep in a sitting position. Stroud approached, moving awkwardly but noiselessly, until he reached the last available cover. There remained twenty-five feet of open ground between him and the kid. While Liam covered it, the boy would have plenty of time to rouse up and use his gun.

Stroud stood upright and took a cautious step. He took two more when the kid suddenly stirred and raised his head. Liam halted. He was still fifteen feet away. The kid's head dropped again and Liam moved on. He was within ten feet and breathing a little more easily when the kid again raised his head and stared wildly about him. "Git away from me, Laybolt!" he half-screamed.

Stroud leaped across the space to pounce on the boy. Jim Richards fought fiercely for a few moments; then his strength gave out and he lay on his back, breathing heavily.

Stroud searched first for the boy's six-shooter but failed to find it. The boy must have been bluffing when he claimed to have the rancher covered.

Looking down at Jimmy Richards, he saw the boy looking at him through tear-wet eyes. "You're goin' to take me back to the School, are you?" the boy asked. "To Laybolt?"

"Takin' you to my ranch, Bub, like I promised," Liam said gruffly. "I told you I don't want no reward. That black won't carry you behind the saddle so I'll have to pack you over the horn. I'm askin' one question: Did you kill that teacher?"

The boy's face changed to a stony mask. "No one would believe me 'less I said I did."

"Why not leave the believin' to me and the sayin' to you? I'm askin' you plain, Bub, did you shoot that hombre?"

The boy hesitated, then sulled again. "Go to hell!" he snapped. "I ain't talkin' to you or nobody else."

"You ain't got a gun here now," Liam went on. "What'd you do with that pistol you killed Springer with?"

"I'm not talkin'," said the boy stubbornly. "Nobody'll believe me anyway."

THE bitterness in the boy's voice touched Stroud. The kid had lost faith in all men. Looking at the boy, he instinctively liked the youngster. With handsome features and his dark hair and blue eyes, he'd be a good-looking boy if he had a little tallow on his ribs. And he sure didn't look like a killer.

It all don't track somehow, Liam thought to himself. *This kid ain't got no gun, mebbe never had none.*

"Kid," he told the boy, "you couldn't be in no worse tight, but I got a hunch you never shot that bird. But we're wastin' time here. Got to git you to my shack. You're froze clear through. Wrap that blanket around you and drink some of this hot coffee. We got a cold ride on the hurricane deck of that black. That wind cuttin' through the pines ain't singin' no damn' lullaby."

He held a cup of coffee to the boy's mouth. The boy drank between violent spasms of shivering and coughing. He still protested, however, when Liam wrapped him in the wool blanket and the rancher's mackinaw, preparing to ride.

The black would have bawled and bucked if two people had tried to sit on him, but when Liam first lifted the boy up over the horn and then swung into the saddle, the horse stood quietly. Many a time Liam had hoisted calves to the back of the black cow horse.

Slowly they started down canyon, with the boy bundled in the wool blanket and mackinaw, held in front of the rider like a sack of grain. Sturdily, the black fought through the violence of the storm, facing with lowered head the wind that whipped blinding clouds of sharp sleet into their faces. It was fight every foot of the way, with the horse having

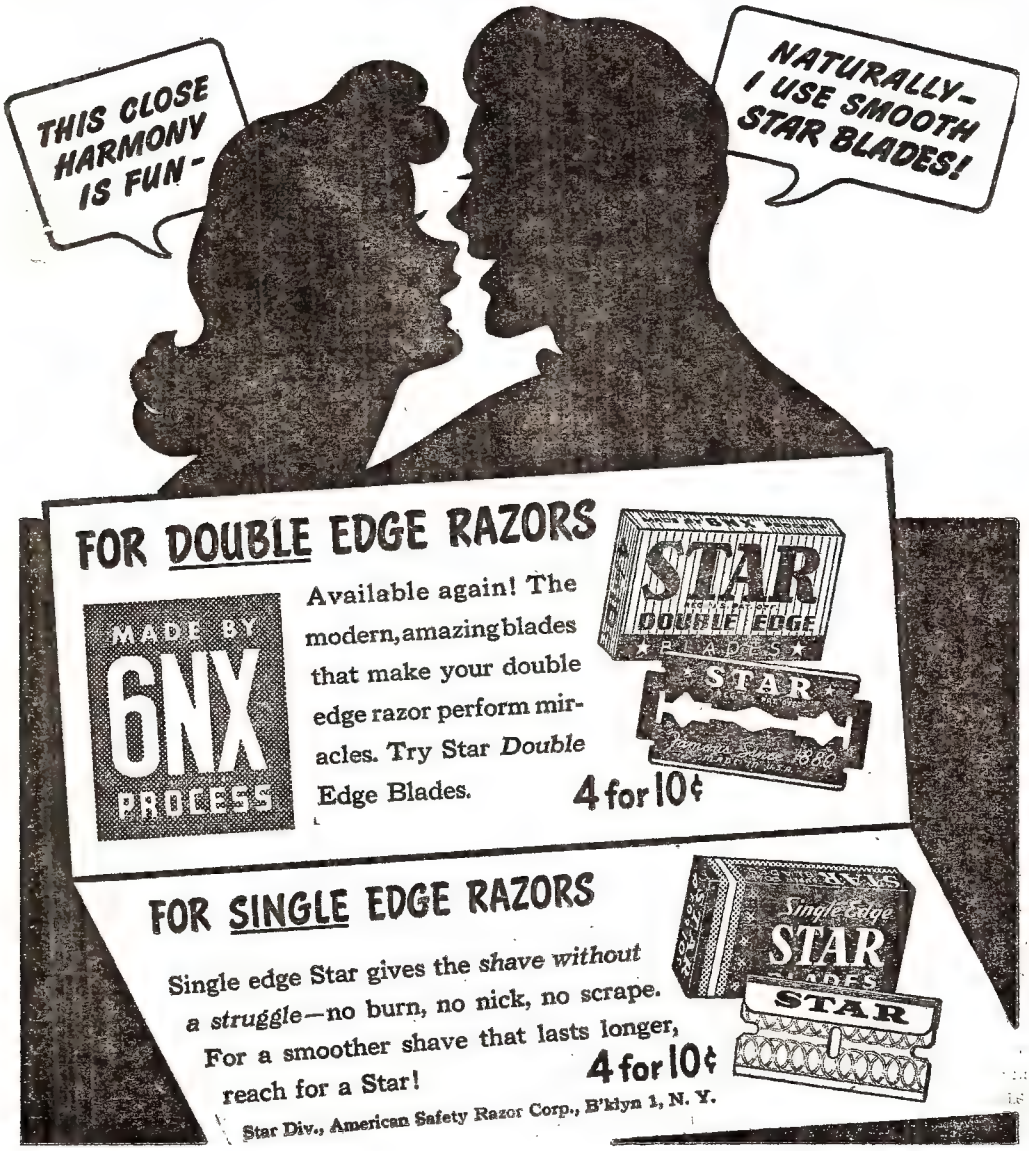
to plunge through occasional hampering drifts.

Arrived at the ranch, Liam, after letting the saddled horse into the stable, carried the boy to the house and indoors to lay him on his own bunk. The thin body was like ice. The stove was still hot, with a pot of coffee on it. Stroud poured a cup down the boy's throat, took off the boy's shoes, rubbed his feet. The pain of restored circulation roused the boy. "You don't believe I killed that teacher, do you, Mister?" he asked weakly.

"Damn right I don't!" Liam exploded. "Of course you didn't kill him. We'll talk it over tomorrow. Right now you need a lot o' shut-eye."

The boy was too weak to undress himself and Liam did it, swearing as he stripped off the boy's clothing and saw the punishing welts made by a whip on the slender back. That's what the law had let Laybolt do to a kid. The law also would take Laybolt's and Goler's word on the shooting over the testimony of a reform school kid. Liam decided suddenly he'd go slow in handing the boy over to the law, even to Sheriff Byers, as much as he trusted the officer. Sheriff Byers was the law, and the law had sent Liam to prison for murder when he had been an eighteen-year-old kid fighting for his life.

He might have to hide the kid for a few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days, but tomorrow, if the weather cleared, there'd be a lot of men out to win that hundred dollar reward—small ranchers, idle punchers wintering in Two Springs. Some were bound to drop in at Liam's cabin to warm and drink a cup of coffee, and they'd see the kid if he were in Liam's bunk.

Across the back end of the peak-roofed one-room cabin was a second floor, built some eight feet above the ground floor and as wide as the cabin, making an open attic. Reached by a ladder, it served as a storeroom, containing a miscellany of Stroud's effects.

It would be safer for the boy in the attic, and Stroud climbed the ladder to make a bed behind a pair of old trunks, carrying up for mattress an old buffalo robe. Adding half a dozen blankets for softness, he brought out a pair of cotton blankets and a pillow.

The bed made, he carried the boy, still breathing raspingly, with spells of coughing, upstairs. Next he brought a big pitcher of cold water and returning to the kitchen end of the house, he began cooking a pot of beef broth. Hospitals seemed to go in strong on broth for sick folks.

CHAPTER FOUR

Stand Up and Fight!

FIGHTING his way through the storm, Stroud went out to unsaddle and grain the black cow horse. Then, returning to the cabin, he looked at the clock and was surprised to find out how early it was. Darkness had dropped early, and the trip to the canyon and back had taken less than three hours. He climbed to the attic; the boy was sleeping, breathing raspingly, but asleep.

Looking down at the thin, shadowed face of the boy, Liam saw himself at the same age—alone, homeless, living as best he could, working for the small wages that ranchers paid a boy to do a man's work, a series of jobs capped by a summer's hard work for which the rancher had refused to pay him any wages at all. All the wrongs he had suffered blazed to life in Liam. This kid wasn't going to be railroaded for something he hadn't done, not if he could help it!

He had abandoned his plan of taking the boy in to Sheriff Byers—at least until such time as he had sounded out the officer. Sheriff Byers, he knew, couldn't be out hunting the fugitive on a night like this. He'd be in the Western Saloon at the county seat with Deputy Ake Madden and other men, playing a little poker, maybe just talking. Liam could go there, find out Byers' attitude. If Byers seemed to be reasonable, he could bring the sheriff out to talk to Jimmy.

On a fresh horse, the trip wouldn't take long; he could go to town and back while the boy slept.

Banking the fire, he drew on his chaps and his jacket and went out to the stable to saddle up the bay cow horse there and rode out again. The roads across the valley were mostly swept clean by the terrific wind and he made good time until the lights of the little county seat town lifted ahead. After putting his horse in a livery stable, he stopped at a small store that was still open, buying a few pounds of coffee. Then he headed for the Western Saloon. There was more than the usual crowd in it, mostly men who had been hunting the valley that day for Jimmy Richards. Unnoticed Liam went to the bar, ordered a hot whiskey drink and dusted the snow off his clothes.

Sheriff Dan Byers was at the end of the bar talking to a knot of men. The sheriff was a big man, calm usually, but excitable this evening. His voice came back to Liam.

"First thing in the morning now," he was saying, "we got to ride to round up this rascal. I've got watchers at most of the ranches in the valley. He'll be showing up somewhere, driven by hunger, and we got to get him. He'll be aiming for the railroad. All of us got to be riding before daylight."

Liam took his time, working his way down the bar, exchanging a few words about the weather and cattle, until he was standing alongside the sheriff. The other men had drifted away.

"What you doing in town tonight, Liam?" asked the sheriff.

Liam touched his parcel. "Out of coffee," he said. "Can't buck weather hunting cattle tomorrer without coffee."

"You quit hunting cattle and help hunt down that renegade kid," said Byers. "Before the young devil murders someone else."

"I dunno," said Liam. "That school ain't been run right. Laybolt and his bunch was mighty rough on those boys. Laybolt oughtn't to of had that job. I'd like to hear the kid's side of that shootin'."

The sheriff shot a sharp look from under brushlike eyebrows. "Hell, they're all plumb ornary kids to begin with. Anyway no amount of rough treatment would justify a kid shootin' a teacher in cold blood. You're lettin' your sympathies run away with you, Liam," he went on sternly, and lowered his voice. "I never knew it to fail: A man who's been in trouble himself takes up for others that gets into trouble."

Liam's angry flush came through the red of his wind-whipped face. "Maybe so," he said, "a feller that's been in trouble knows how the law works. I don't think that boy killed that teacher. I'd be willin' to bet he didn't."

The sheriff stepped back, looked Liam over. "You know anything about the case?"

"No," Liam admitted. "I just got a hunch."

THE sheriff snorted. "Keep your hunches to yourself. That kid murdered the teacher, all right. The evidence I've heard is enough to hang him, if he was old enough to be hung." His voice rose. "No chance he's not guilty. He's just a snake-blood kid gone wild. Usually I say, 'Wait till a jury decides before you call a person guilty.' But this is different."

"I'd still bet that kid didn't do it," maintained Stroud stubbornly. "All those men over there were appointed by Laybolt and they'd naturally say what he told 'em to say. And you'd find it out if you hear both sides of the story."

"Don't need to," said the sheriff roughly. "What's got into you, Liam, going off half-cocked about something you don't know a thing about? I figured you had more sense. Be careful how you talk. You leave it to me to handle. Don't forget you're under parole."

In Stroud anger gathered, came near erupting. He had thought Byers was a square-shooter and would give Jimmy Richards a break.

"I'm just warning you—stay out of this," the sheriff went on. "You can't do any good, and if you go against Laybolt he can make it tough for you. He's got a lot of influence at the capitol. They could rig up something against you and get you sent back. The bunch running the State don't want a scandal out here. It'll go damn' hard with you if you don't keep your neck tucked in, savvy?"

"Yeah, I savvy," said Liam bitterly. "To keep a scandal down, they'd let a kid be railroaded and killed for something he didn't do."

He left carrying his coffee and got his horse. Fighting the roaring storm on the way back, he flung curses at the sheriff. Byers wouldn't listen to the kid's story; nobody would. He was already as good as convicted.

His horse, eager to get out of the storm, made fast time home. In the attic the boy was still sleeping soundly, although his loud breathing seemed to fill the cabin.

Stroud could not sleep but spent the night keeping up the fire under the broth and thinking. To Liam, the case of this boy had become his own. His fate was tied up with the kid's. To hell with Sheriff Byers' warning, and to hell with the law! What this boy needed was justice, and Liam would see that he got it.

At dawn the snow had stopped, but a freezing wind was howling about the cabin, kicking up snow clouds and piling up drifts. The boy was sleeping, with occasional short spells of coughing. Liam went out to feed his stock.

Bringing back a big armful of wood, he stuffed the stove. The boy was awake and Liam took him up a big bowl of broth. He seemed a lot better and fell asleep again as soon as he had finished eating.

Liam cooked a pot of coffee for himself and was on his third cup when he heard a hail from outdoors. Through a hole in the frost on the window he saw Deputy Sheriff Ake Madden and another man so wrapped up Liam could not identify him until he turned his head. Liam started. It was Superintendent Joe Laybolt.

Liam was in a panic. The boy was lying asleep but his breathing to Liam's big ears seemed to reach clear to the kitchen. Hastily he flung on his mackinaw and got into his chaps. Then, clamping his sombrero on his head, he opened the door.

"Howdy," he greeted the two curtly. "I'm just riding out. Got a lot of stock to look after today or I'd ask you fellers to stop and have a cup of coffee."

"That's all right; we'll just take it ourselves," said Deputy Ake Madden. "We're damn' near froze. You go ahead and ride out."

Liam hesitated. Coming in, they'd probably hear the boy. If he ordered them to keep out, it would arouse their suspicions. He grunted, "I guess I can stay a while. Put your horses in the corral if they won't kick my cows to death; and give 'em some hay."

"Take care my horse for me, will you, Ake?" asked Laybolt. "I'm too froze to walk. Damn that kid for going hog wild in a spell of weather like this."

While the deputy led the horses away, Laybolt stepped inside to spread his thick, powerful hands over the stove. "I don't s'pose the kid walked in here to warm last night?" he asked.

"No, he didn't walk in," said Liam truthfully. "Still huntin' him, are you? He's likely layin' froze out som'ers."

"Maybe he is; maybe he ain't," said Laybolt. "He's a tough one."

The deputy entered, a tall, long-faced man, his skin red as a beet. Ake Madden was deputy only because of his vote-drawing power. Given to excessive whiskey drinking, he made up partly for the fault by being a genial, good-natured sort, whether drunk or sober. He acted now as if he was going to stay a long time, taking off his mackinaw and overshoes. Luckily the kid seemed asleep. Or maybe if he was awake, he realized the danger he ran if he made any noise.

"Cozy sort of place you got here, Liam," he said.

"Is it?" said Liam grumpily. "It ain't so damn' cozy that I can see." He motioned the two to cups and the coffee pot and they

poured them full. Ake shook in condensed milk.

"Guess you know why we're ridin' over here," said the deputy. "Huntin' that boy who shot and killed the teacher at the Ree-form School. I kin use that hundred pesos reward to buy whskey."

"You'll find him dead," said Liam positively.

"If he's found dead, the reward still goes," said Laybolt. The man's eyes looked bloodshot and his face was drawn.

LIAM turned from Laybolt to Ake Madden, studying him. Maybe the sheriff, suspecting something queer from Liam's championship of the fugitive, had sent his deputy here as a spy. Fresh anger against the sheriff grew in Liam.

Meanwhile Jimmy, maybe disturbed by the voices, let out a faint strangled cough. Hastily Liam rattled a stove lid and noisily stuffed in more wood. Apparently, neither man noticed the cough, but the pair had to be gotten rid of, fast.

Liam brought out the remains of a quart of Bourbon and divided it among the three coffee cups.

"You'll need it for your ride," he said pointedly. "And if you're going to collect that reward, Ake, you can't ride none too soon."

"Uh-huh," agreed Ake. He'd had a few snorts already and the additional whiskey made him feel drowsily comfortable indoors. "I figger that boy's holed up som'ers."

"That's why you ought to hustle out and hunt him down 'fore he starts travelin'," said Liam.

"And I know where he's holed up, I bet," went on Ake. "Over at Clabber Wells. There's a shack over there. That's the place."

"I'll tell you where I think he might be," said Liam. "I got to thinkin' last night, Laybolt, what you said about the kid wearin' a red sweater. I seen a flash of red over on the slope above the Injun Overhang in the Del Norte. It wasn't a cow or calf—too bright. I'm bettin' it was the boy."

Laybolt looked at Liam hard. "You might be right," he said. "Whyn't you tell us when you met us?"

"Didn't think of it," lied Stroud.

"Let Ake go to Clabber Wells," said Laybolt. "You and me will ride to Del Norte."

"All right," Liam agreed. In the storm he figured he could shake the man quickly. "Le's be going." He closed the stove and flung open the door. The men put on their overshoes and gloves and stepped outdoors into the freezing wind and clouds of drifting snow.

Liam shut the door firmly and following the pair to the corral, went into the stable to saddle Nig.

"Just wastin' your time ridin' to the Del Norte," said Ake jovially. "I tell you that boy is at Clabber Wells. I bet you ten he's there, camped in that old shack huggin' the fire. I'll have him and be back in town by noon. Where's that old trail outa your place?"

"It takes off from the hill," said Liam. He looked at Laybolt, who was shifting blankets under his saddle. "I'll be right back," he called to Laybolt. "Got to show Ake a trail."

Laybolt nodded and Stroud on horseback accompanied Ake into the brushy slope to point to a gap between two pine trees on a hill. "Right there," he said, and Ake disposed of, loped back hastily to rejoin the superintendent.

Returning, he saw Laybolt's horse standing close to the house door. Laybolt was not in sight.

Liam gave a loud shout and spurred his horse down the slope, sending the black plowing recklessly through deep drifts. Laybolt had gone back into the house, maybe suspecting something.

Yelling angrily, in a final rush Liam came up to the house to fling himself from the saddle and burst in through the door. He saw Laybolt on the ladder nearly to a level with the attic floor.

"Git down outa there, you Laybolt!" Stroud called.

"There's somebody up here," returned Laybolt, turning his head. "Sounded like a kid coughin', to me. I'm seein' if it's that Jimmy Richards killer. If it is, I'm takin' him."

Liam Stroud saw red. "You'll take hell!" he shouted. "Get back down that ladder!"

"So you have got that kid here," snarled Laybolt. "I suspected it. Let me tell you something, Stroud. I know who you are now. You told me yesterday about how you a'most killed a man when you were a younker. It come to me last night—where I'd heard your name before, way on the other end of the State. I lived a few counties over at the time and had forgot all about it. You didn't a'most kill that rancher: you killed him when you was eighteen, in a quarrel over wages. They sent you up for fifteen years, and you served seven when they let you out on parole. You got the other eight to serve if you bust your parole. Interfere here now by helping this boy, and you'll go back to the pen, savvy? Think it over, jailbird."

Stroud hesitated. Sweat broke out on his face.

"Stopped you, didn't I?" sneered Laybolt. "I figured it would."

Thoughts swirled confusedly in Stroud's brain. This was showdown for him. Sheriff Byers had been just talking hard but Lay-

bolt's threat was not mere talk. He'd do exactly what he said: Send Stroud back to the hell of a stone corral. For years Stroud had avoided people so he would have less chance of running into trouble. He could avoid trouble now by letting Laybolt take the boy. For a sweating moment he debated within himself, and then he slowly shook his head. The law had taken Liam, handed him seven years of hell. The law wasn't going to do that to Jimmy Richards.

"To hell with my parole," he told Laybolt. "You're not takin' the boy."

"Protectin' him, are you?" sneered Laybolt. "A killer kid. You been listening to his lies, claimin' I killed Springer." The man's face convulsed with sudden black fury. "He'll never live to tell those lies to anyone else and you'll never live to repeat 'em."

It flashed through Stroud's brain that Laybolt was practically confessing that he had killed Springer and had framed the boy, otherwise he would not be so desperate. It flashed through his mind also that Laybolt had his gun in his hand while Stroud's Colt's was under his buttoned mackinaw.

HE ACTED instinctively, doing the only thing possible. As Laybolt began to turn around on the ladder, swinging his six-shooter with him, Liam charged, crashing into the ladder before Laybolt, in an awkward position, could lower his weapon. The ladder went down under the impact and Laybolt went with it, his gun hammer exploding a cartridge as he fell. The bullet whammed into the oven door of the stove, to ricochet into a wall.

Stroud leaped on Laybolt as the man fell, trying to get his hands on the superintendent's gun, but Laybolt rolled free and turned to grab Stroud's legs, yanking him to the floor also. As Stroud came crashing down, Laybolt lashed out with his gun. The barrel struck Stroud's head glancingly but hard enough to spin the room around for him. Dazed for a moment, he barely managed to clutch Stroud's gun arm and hang on to it.

Laybolt, unable to fire, got to his feet with Stroud still hanging to his gun arm. While the pair struggled for possession of the weapon, Laybolt kicked the rancher in the chest, knocking him on his back. Laybolt jerked his arm free and stepped back.

"Got you now," said Laybolt, and deliberately raised the weapon.

Stroud, helpless for the moment, looked up at Laybolt and saw directly above the man, leaning out over the open attic floor, Jimmy Richards. Next instant the boy had dropped down on Laybolt's shoulders. Laybolt's second shot sailed far wild while Stroud galvanized himself to his feet.

The boy had not knocked the superintendent from his feet, but he was still partially atop the man. When Stroud crashed into Laybolt, the man went down and Jimmy Richards with him, the boy rolling to the cabin wall. Laybolt lay sprawled for a moment, arms on the floor, gun held loosely in his hand. Liam kicked the weapon and it slid to the floor, spinning as it went.

Desperately Laybolt surged to his feet to begin a whirlwind attack on Stroud, hammering him with hard blows that were like the mule kicks that had killed young Grant Springer. Liam Stroud was no Grant Springer, however; he was tough enough to take all that Laybolt could give and more. Meanwhile, wading in doggedly, he smashed Laybolt's face repeatedly, snapping back the man's head.

Near the wall Jimmy Richards crouched, holding a chair, looking for a chance to thrust it between Laybolt's legs and overturn the man.

Shoved back by Stroud's punches, Laybolt retreated slowly, and Jimmy Richards shoved in the chair. His strength was not sufficient; Laybolt kicked the chair aside and as the boy rushed in behind him, knocked him away with one backhand blow.

Stroud took advantage of this to rip open

his mackinaw to get at his Colt's, but Laybolt rushed and they were at it again with their fists. Laybolt, with the easy living of political jobs behind him, was getting winded and before Stroud began to drop back toward the bunk of stout two-by-fours.

AS LAYBOLT neared it, the rancher lashed out with a kick from the shoulder that sent the superintendent crashing back into the bunk. It gave Stroud time to stoop to grab his heavy bootjack from the floor and raise it high. As Laybolt started to come out of the bunk, the bootjack descended squarely on his head. The beefy superintendent grunted and went out cold.

Breathing heavily Stroud turned to locate Jimmy Richards, who was getting shakily to his feet.

"We got him," said Stroud. "But if you hadn't jumped down on him, he'd of planted a bullet in me and then in you. Sit down, son, and take it easy."

"I feel all right," said the boy, but still weak, he sat in a chair while Liam brought him a cup of coffee. Then Stroud tied Laybolt's ankles and wrists. The superintendent was beginning to stir a little.

"You're sure a scrapper, Mister," the boy said admiringly. "At the School the boys thought no man alive could lick Laybolt. I wisht they all could of seen that scrap."

"It took two of us to lick him," said Stroud. "But why does he want to kill you? Account he's the one that killed Springer?"

"I think he did it or had it done. I sure didn't shoot Springer; I never had no gun. All I know is yesterday, late, Laybolt came to let me out of that rock house where he had me chained up. After supper the head guard, Les Beech, told me to clean up in the kitchen. I finished there after eight o'clock and I was leavin' for the dormitory when Beech told me Laybolt wanted to see me in his office. I headed up there, passing that ringboned sorrel tied below the house; it wasn't too dark to see twenty feet or so. I didn't think anything of it. I sure wasn't going to try running away again unless I had to.

"I'd gone only a few steps past the horse when I heard a shot and somebody yelled, 'Stop, you Jim Richards.' I don't know who yelled that, but he was over near the rock storehouse and right away there come a gun shot and the same fellow yelled, 'Don't shoot me, Jim; it's Springer, your friend.' Then there was another shot. After that Laybolt hollered from his office window, 'That Richards kid just shot Springer.'

"I was scared and I untied that sorrel and rode off. But I didn't go far. Tied the sorrel and sneaked back to find out what it was about. Laybolt and the guards had lanterns and were around Springer's body. I got real close and from the talk I heard Springer had been shot through the heart and they'd put the shooting on me. I didn't have no chance with all those men claiming I'd shot Springer, so I went back to the horse and rode until he got lame. No one would ever believe me." Tears came to the boy's eyes. His defiance of the night before had all gone; he was just a scared kid.

Liam Stroud reached out to pat the boy's shoulder. "I believe you," he said. "And with a lot of luck we'll make even that fool sheriff believe you. We got just one chance of showing you're innocent, and that's to get evidence proving it. And the only place to get that evidence is the School. We'll tie up this polecat and you and me will ride over. Some of the boys will know the truth about this shooting: boys always know a heap of what's going on. Most of the men will be away from School hunting you; that'll give us a few hours. Are you in shape to ride?"

Jim Richards nodded. "Sure." Hope was kindling in the eyes which before had seemed like a trapped animal's. "But, Mister, Laybolt said you had a sentence to serve out if you got into trouble. You can't afford to risk helpin' me this-away."

Stroud's hand pressed down hard on the boy's shoulder. His heart was heavy. He knew the influence a politician like Laybolt can bring into a court. The odds were overwhelmingly against this boy championed by an ex-convict.

"Leave the risk to me, Jimmy," he said. "I can't afford not to help you, kid. You and me, we'll make a fight of it together, tryin' to prove you never shot that teacher. There wasn't no one to help me fight when I killed that man years ago; I was alone. You're not alone, Jimmy—not as long as I'm around. Nobody is going to hurt you—Laybolt or Byers or any of 'em—as long as I'm able to stand on two feet and fight."

CHAPTER FIVE

Trapped!

PREPARING to leave, Stroud decided to nail up the one door to the house. As an afterthought he gagged Laybolt and then managed to hoist him up the ladder to the attic. By now the superintendent was fully conscious.

"Better not roll off," Stroud advised him. "It's a long drop."

Among his effects Stroud found for the boy an old sheepskin jacket and a pair of small bullhide chaps. Outdoors he unsaddled Laybolt's horse, turning the animal loose and hiding the gear. Digging up an old saddle, he

cinched it on a gentle horse for Jimmy Richards. Then saddling Nig for himself, they set out through a wind that drove clouds of snow into their faces. Stroud led the way, his black breaking trail through the drifts.

Coming down the canyon trail above the Reform School, they rode out of the wind into comparative quiet. They were still a quarter of a mile above the School when they ran into a rider. Stroud reached for the gun under his mackinaw but it was one of the School boys, a skinny dark-haired youth astride an old pony.

"So they got you, Jim?" called this rider. "We was hopin' you'd get away."

"They ain't caught me yet, Bob," returned Jim Richards. "This Stroud is goin' to help prove me innocent. He's comin' to the School to try to collect evidence."

The boy, who was out evidently hunting cattle, looked at Stroud with sudden hatred. "Hell, Jimmy," he said, "this rancher's just foolin' you. Ain't no man goin' to help any of us at the School. Nobody except that Springer ever tried it—and look what happened to him. This bird is just stallin' you along until turns you over to Laybolt."

troud flinched. These boys lived in a world where all men were their enemies.

"No, Bob he's all right," Jimmy Richards insisted. "He fought to keep Laybolt from takin' me. Licked him bad," he added proudly. "He don't believe I killed Springer."

"My bunkie, Lee Beck, says he knows you didn't and he can prove it," said the boy, Bob. "Said he seen Springer go into the house to talk to Laybolt that afternoon and he never come out again. None of us saw Springer that day—not until the shootin'. Lee says Springer told him before goin' in to see Laybolt that him and Laybolt was due for a fight over our not goin' to school. Springer told Lee things would be changed; he was going to the legislature to get Laybolt fired."

Liam Stroud nodded with satisfaction. What Bob had told was motive for Laybolt's killing of Springer. "Where's this Lee Beck?" he asked.

"Cleanin' out the cow barn."

"And who's at the ranch—what men?" asked Liam.

BOB thought a minute. "Laybolt and Goler and Beech and Clemons are out looking for Jimmy. 'Buzzard' Grandy has got a bunch of kids out cutting wood on the ridge. That leaves just old Puff Bayles and Poison Oakes around the School."

Stroud heaved a sigh of relief. He knew both men. Puff Bayles was a decrepit, ancient cowboy. Oakes assayed few brains.

"Where could those two be shut up?" he inquired.

Jimmy Richards spoke promptly. "That rock storehouse where they had me locked up."

"You ride ahead, Bob, and get that Lee Beck," Stroud instructed the rider. "I'm going to tell Puff Bayles and Oakes I'm delivering Jimmy."

Bob nodded and loped on ahead, while Stroud got down to tie Jimmy's hands loosely to the horn. They came into the yards about the School barns with the boy ahead.

A man hurried toward them from the stables, Puff Bayles, the oldish cowhand who had lived most of his life in the valley.

"Got your lost sheep, Puff," Liam told him. "Where'll I put him?"

Before Bayles could answer, Oakes, a hated guard whom the boys had nicknamed Poison, trotted over from a feed lot where he was in charge of half a dozen boys. "Got him, did you?" he called. "That'll sure make Laybolt feel good. You can turn him over to us."

"I don't turn him over to nobody until I get my reward," said Stroud. "I'll wait here till the boss shows up. But if you got a good place to pen him up, I'll leave him there. He's a slippery little devil and I'm not taking chances on his running off."

"We'll show you where he'll be safe," Oakes told him. "And you can chain him up yourself."

The two guards led the way to the stone house where Oakes took off the padlock and went in to light a lantern. Puff waited outside. Stroud got down and untied Jimmy's wrists from the saddle horn.

"All right, Puff," he said as the boy swung down. "I'll take him in. You lead the way."

Puff obediently stepped inside and Stroud pulled the door shut behind the man and snapped the padlock. Inside Bayles and Oakes recovered from their surprise to start a loud bellowing. Liam let them bellow. The hell with them.

The boy they had met, Bob, came riding up with another boy sitting behind him, a skinny, freckled youth of seventeen or eighteen.

"Here's Lee Beck," said Bob. "He says he knows Jimmy didn't shoot Springer."

"Course he didn't," said Lee Beck. "I seen Springer go to Laybolt's office that afternoon. I was watching him close from the dairy barn; he'd told me he was having a showdown with Laybolt. Springer never come out of that house, but Laybolt did to talk to you; I was watchin' every minute. Next I seen Springer it was that night, dead. But there wasn't no shots fired while Springer was in the house.

"Another thing," Lee Beck went on,

"Billy Peters, who sneaked down to the horse barn that evening to get out of Poison Oakes' way, saw Goler saddling that sorrel a little before the shooting. Laybolt claimed Jimmy stole that horse outa the barn and saddled him. He lied. They planted the sorrel out there for Jimmy to grab."

Laybolt, thought Stroud, had figured the School boys wouldn't be seeing things that would make holes in his story or that they'd be afraid to tell them. Against what these bronc boys might say, however, would be the evidence of all the School employees, well-coached by Laybolt. More than the testimony of the boys was needed to clear Jimmy.

He considered Puff Bayles. The old fellow had never been too bright and lately was regarded as plumb simple-minded. Puff might be persuaded into telling something against Laybolt. Liam turned back to the rock house where Poison Oakes was keeping up a steady yelling. He rapped on the door.

"Puff," he called. "Come on out."

"I'm comin' out too," announced Poison Oakes.

"If you do, I'll plant a slug of lead in your belly," said Stroud. "Puff, you come out alone."

Bayles emerged and the door was again padlocked. Puff looked at Stroud uneasily.

"Puff," said Stroud directly, "you know they can't get away with trying to clear Laybolt. Everybody knows he killed Springer and tried to put the blame on Jimmy here."

"They do!" exclaimed Puff, startled. "Ever'body knows it, do they?"

"Sure. The only question is did Laybolt shoot and kill Springer that night, or in the afternoon?"

"In the afternoon," said Bayles promptly. "Anyway, that's when he hit him."

"What did he hit him with?" asked Liam.

"HE DIDN'T use nothin' to hit him with," said Puff. "Jist hit him with his fist. But I ain't s'posed to know nothin' about it," he added hastily. "Goler and Beech didn't know I was close enough to hear 'em talkin'. Laybolt hit Springer in the head and jist knocked his brains plumb loose. Yessir," he went on garrulously, "Laybolt killed him right in his office. You kin still see the blood stains in there. Mrs. Pressy, the cook, said she c'd see the stains there on the carpet, what they'd left after trying to scrub out the blood. Springer must of bled a lot."

"You'll come into town and tell Sheriff Byers about this?" asked Stroud.

Puff hesitated. "I'd lose my job."

"That's better than gettin' put in the pen for hiding the truth," said Stroud impressively.

"I wouldn't testify ag'in Laybolt," said Puff. "I'm afraid of him. If ever'body knows he done it, why bother me?"

Puff, Liam was sure, would talk if urged by Sheriff Byers. He turned to the boys. "We're all goin' to Two Springs—you, Lee, and Bob and Puff and Jimmy. Bob and Lee, you get a team hitched to a wagon. Puff and Jimmy and I will go have a look at that carpet in Laybolt's office. We might rip it up to take along for evidence. Hustle with that wagon; we got to be out of here before some of the men get back."

Following a path scooped in the snow, they headed for the pretentious house Laybolt occupied as his living quarters.

"Laybolt won't like us all trompin' into his house," said old Puff uneasily. "But Miz Laybolt's away and maybe he won't find out."

They crossed the pillared porch of the house and finding the front door unlocked, trooped upstairs. The door of the office was likewise unlocked and they entered.

There was a definite stain on the thick rose and gold carpet, a huge one that someone had tried to wash out with soap and water. Jimmy, prying about, opened the closet door and called to them. The floor boards had been recently scrubbed but there was a huge dull colored blotch left on the boards.

"That's where they kept him until he died," murmured Puff Bayles. "Then they took him out and shot him and put it on Jim here."

"What did they do with the body?"

"Took it to the undertaker at Haddon right after the inquest," said Puff. "Laybolt and Beech and Goler was the only ones to testify."

The undertaker at Haddon, a little town twenty miles distant, must be a friend of Laybolt's, Stroud decided. Otherwise why would Laybolt have taken the dead teacher there instead of to Two Springs, a few miles away? If Sheriff Byers would agree to ask for a post-mortem examination, that alone might be enough to show Jimmy innocent, if death was shown to have come from a blow on the head.

"Time to get goin'," said Liam, and turned, warned by some instinct, to glance toward the doorway. Joe Laybolt, a gun in his paw, stood there, his eyes bloodshot with rage. Goler and Beech were behind him.

Laybolt stepped in to the room. "Ain't this nice?" he said. "You and Jimmy Richards and old Puff here together, huntin' for blood-stains, hey? Ain't you the smart one, Stroud? And ain't it handy for me you're a paroled convict? It'll make folks ready to believe you helped a escaped murderin' kid and we had to shoot you and him both. And in the fight with us you killed weak-minded old Puff."

"It'll be hard for you to explain why a

fugitive kid come back to the School," said Liam, but he knew Laybolt would fix up a good story. Laybolt would put enough fear into the School boys to seal their mouths. "You got here quick. I figured you'd be tied up the rest of the day."

"Goler and Beech happened to find my loose horse and back tracked to your ranch," explained Laybolt with a heavy satisfaction. "I kicked down a trunk when Goler yelled. That's how we're here so quick. Take his gun, Beech."

Beech stepped forward, carefully avoiding giving Stroud a chance to grab him, and lifted Stroud's gun. With it went Stroud's last faint hope.

CHAPTER SIX

End of the Trail

STROUD could see no chance of escape. Laybolt's and Goler's guns had him covered, while Beech shucked Liam of his Colt's. Jimmy Richards was looking at him with hopeless despair again in his young

oud could have given his life to save y, he would have done it unhesitatingly. hat at least would have been some balancing to the injustice of the years Stroud had spent in prison. He had shot a man, but only after the man had shot at him. He had told the rancher he was taking a horse in place of the promised wages, and the rancher had pulled a gun on Stroud. Liam had grappled with him and in the scuffle the man had been shot by his own weapon. That had been ignored in the trial of a friendless young stranger.

A hail came from the drive below the house. Goler crossed the room to look out of the front window. "It's Sheriff Byers, boss," he yelped in alarm. "Don't do no shootin' now. I'll go down and get rid of him."

"All right," said Laybolt. "But let out one yip, Stroud, and I'll gun you down now and fix up the story later."

Hurrying toward the door, Goler thoughtlessly crossed in front of Stroud, between Laybolt's gun and Liam. It was the break Stroud had prayed for. He grabbed it by crashing a shoulder against Goler, shoving him into Laybolt. Beech he had to ignore for the moment, hoping that the action would be so lively that Beech would be unable to take part. Following his initial shove against Goler, Stroud grappled with Goler and grabbed wildly for the gun the man held.

Jimmy Richards had moved almost as quickly as Liam, leaping on Beech as the guard rushed in, six-shooter ready for firing or use as a club. The boy made a dive for Beech's gun arm, to cling to it, suspending his weight from it. It would have taken only a few seconds for Beech to shake the boy loose, but Jimmy had unexpected help. Lee Beck and Bob, noting the arrival of Laybolt and his two assistants, had rushed into the house and up the stairs. Promptly they also flung themselves on Beech. Before the savage attack of the three boys, Beech was overwhelmed and brought to the floor. Old Puff Bayles stood aside, bewilderedly unable to make up his mind what side to take in the struggle.

The clash in the room was savage and lightning fast. Stroud's attack on the officers had been an explosion of all the rancher's pent-up desperation and rage against fate. Laybolt, taken by surprise as Goler was shoved into him, stepped back and in too crowded quarters to fire his Colt's, raised it as a hammer, bringing it down with terrific force and aimed at Stroud. Stroud sensed rather than saw the descending gun and dodged, yanking Goler automatically with him. As it happened it was Goler's head that Laybolt's pistol smashed into, with a crack like the breaking of a thick-shelled ostrich egg.

Goler dropped his gun and collapsed limply

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in Stroud's arms. The rancher shoved the unconscious man against Laybolt who was still retreating, trying to get room to use his gun as a firearm. When the superintendent reached the wall, Stroud dropped Goler and leaped at the superintendent, smashing him in the face. Then in a fury he hit Laybolt twice, terrific jolts straight on the jaw. Laybolt dropped to his knees to dodge the whirlwind of blows and trying to lift his gun. Stroud, gone berserk, ignoring the threat of the gun, got Laybolt by the throat and slammed the man to the floor. Snatching Laybolt's gun, he swung on Beech, only to see him disarmed, being held down by the three boys.

Liam turned back to Laybolt who was struggling to his knees. He clouted him again and as Laybolt went down, Stroud picked him up, took two strides and flung him bodily against the wall. The superintendent struck head first and landed heavily on the floor, completely out.

STROUD turned on Beech, but Beech was helpless. A lank man built like the unconscious Goler, Beech had had little chance against the three wildcats who had swarmed over him, eager for a chance to satisfy their deep hatred for the brutal head of the School guards. After they had brought Beech to the floor, Jimmy Richards had sunk his teeth into the wrist of the hand holding the gun. Beech dropped it and after that, no matter how hard the man kicked and heaved, he could not displace the three.

The noise of the swift action in Laybolt's office had reached Sheriff Byers. He had ridden up to dismount and clump upstairs, shouting as he ran: "What's going on up there? This is Sheriff Byers talkin'; quiet down."

The officer's warning gave Stroud time to get behind the door just before the sheriff charged in. Amazed, Byers stopped, seeing Beech, Laybolt and Goler on the floor, the latter two unconscious. He stared at the boys and then at old Puff Bayles. "So help me!" he roared, swinging his six-shooter belligerently. "What happened here?"

At a slight movement behind him he turned to face Liam's gun barrel. "Drop your gun, Sheriff," Stroud ordered. "Drop it, I say!"

"Drop hell!" roared Byers, his face purpling. "So it's you, Stroud. I told you to keep out of this and let me handle it."

"I didn't like the way you were handling it," Liam returned grimly. He nodded at Jimmy. "You were letting that innocent kid be railroaded. Drop your iron, Sheriff."

Byers hesitated before the threat in the rancher's voice. Then "Nobody ever made me drop a gun in my life," he said. "I'm too old to learn now. Me, I'm the sheriff and nobody gives me orders. What proof you got this boy is innocent?"

"Laybolt killed Springer in this room," said Stroud. "I can show you bloodstains here on the floor. Old Puff Bayles can tell you. He overheard Goler and Beech talkin'."

Beech, released by the boys, was sitting up. "Puff don't know a damn' thing," he snarled. "He's weak in the head anyhow."

"How about it, Puff?" asked Sheriff Byers. "You ain't much of a witness, but what do you know about that murder?"

Old Puff was trembling. "M-Me?" he quavered. "Why, like they all said, the kid shot the teacher. That's all I know."

"What did I tell you, Stroud?" sneered Byers. "The old coot's evidence is no good."

"But the boys here," said Stroud. "Ask them about it."

"You fool, the word of reform school boys won't be taken in court," said the sheriff. "Your proof's no good. I s'pose you knocked out Goler and Laybolt? If so, you're sunk. You've raised hell here, and it means going back to serve those eight years. Speak up: Did you knock out Goler and Laybolt?"

"I knocked out Laybolt," growled [illegible] "I had to fight or get killed. Laybolt knocked out Goler by mistake. But what difference does that make? You were against this boy from the start. We'd have no chance in the courts, but we'll make our own chance. We're hitting the owlhoot trail, Jimmy and me." He shifted the gun significantly. "Take your choice, Sheriff. Drop that gun or try to use it. Give up and I'll lock all of you up in that jail of Laybolt's while me and Jimmy hit the trail. Drop that iron, Sheriff. It's the last chance I'm giving you."

Jimmy Richards broke in. "Liam," he cried, "don't do it! I'm not going with you. I got you into this trouble. You done enough for me. Give him your gun, Liam. Maybe they'll let you off on that sentence." He turned on Byers. "Sheriff," he pleaded, "Liam was only trying to help me. He rode into the mountains last night to save me from freezing. Today he risked his life twice for me, just because he figured I never killed that teacher. Give him another chance, Sheriff."

Byers stared at the boy and then cried sharply, "Look out, Liam!" Stroud swung sharply. Beech was whipping up a gun from the floor. The sheriff flung himself past Liam, to kick the gun from Beech's hand. Beech fell back against the wall, howling with pain. Stroud stared at the sheriff and saw that Byers was grinning a little.

"You had your chance to get me then, Byers," stammered Stroud confusedly. "And didn't."

The sheriff nodded. "Liam, you got me wrong. I smelled polecat here from the first. I had to pretend to believe what Laybolt told me about that murder while I investigated. I doubted that the boy shot Springer but I didn't know for sure, and I was sore at you, Liam, for butting in. If you'd told me you had the boy, it would have been different. You did a hell of a brave thing in sticking up for him, and the kid, by what he's just said, isn't the sort to kill a man. We'll get at the bottom of this; I'm here to meet a man that may clear it all up."

Goler, groaning, was trying to sit up but not able to make it. In the far corner of the room Laybolt opened his eyes and struggled to his knees.

BELOW, a rattle of wheels sounded. Byers and Stroud stepped to a window. Two horses on a lope drew a buckboard past the stables and corrals and pulled up in front of the house. A livery man drove; by his side sat a stranger, a city man judging from his clothes.

Sheriff Byers leaned from the window. "Come up, Senator Bronson," he called.

"Senator Bronson!" exclaimed Laybolt and making a tremendous effort, the superintendent got to his feet.

The buckboard passenger, a dignified white-haired man, came up the stairs and entered.

"Senator, how are you?" Laybolt greeted the newcomer. "You've come for your nephew, I suppose? Poor Grant. I had the body taken to the undertaker at Haddon."

"Yes, we know," said the Senator sternly. "I've just been at Haddon. You got some explaining to do, Laybolt. The post-mortem ordered by Sheriff Byers showed Grant died from a brain concussion—not from the shot that went through his heart. He was already dead when he was shot."

Laybolt tried to look astonished but it was poor acting. Laybolt was remembering the march to the gallows he had once witnessed. The man weaved on his feet, all but collapsed.

"I kin tell you," said old Puff Bayles, again changing sides. "The teacher was killed right in this room by Laybolt hittin' him, and then they shot him and put it on to Jimmy Richards."

"Shut up, Puff," said the sheriff. "We'll hear from you later."

"I'll tell you all about it," put in Beech, turning against Laybolt. "I hadn't a thing to do with the murder of Springer. Laybolt forced me and Goler to—"

"We'll hear you later too," said Byers. "Le's start this with what Jimmy Richards has to say. But first, Senator, I want you to shake hands with an outstanding rancher in the valley—Liam Stroud. This is Senator Bronson, Liam. And now let's get down to cases. This is the Jimmy Richards, Senator, they claimed shot Grant. He's your witness, sir."

It took two hours for the telling of the stories of Jimmy, Liam, Puff, Beech, Bob, young Lee Beck and a dozen other boys. It included much of the cruelties and harshness practised by Laybolt and his crew. Senator Bronson, a lawyer by profession, questioned skillfully. By the time the examinations were over, all of the boys from the School, including the wood-cutter gang, had gathered in front of the house.

"Boys," Sheriff Byers told them finally, "I've got news for you. It was Superintendent Laybolt that killed your teacher, Grant Springer, not Jimmy Richards. Senator Bronson wants me to take charge here until a new superintendent can be appointed. The Senator was about to make an investigation of the School, due to reports sent him by his nephew, Grant. Senator, do you want to say a word to the boys?"

Bronson nodded. "From now on, boys," he said, "you'll be in a real school—not a prison. We're hiring real teachers, not politicians, and they'll see you get schooling and training in trades and ranch and farm life. It will no longer be a reform school; it will be an industrial and agricultural school."

Liam Stroud put his hand over Jimmy Richards' shoulder. He was not giving him up; Jimmy was going to live with him. The boy could ride to the School each day, but he'd stay with Stroud as his adopted son. Liam had risked his liberty for the sake of this boy; and the boy had saved him from being killed by Laybolt. They belonged to each other.

"We'll want a local man on the Board that runs the School," stated Senator Bronson. "I'll take the man that you recommend, Sheriff."

"What better man could you get than the one who worked lone-handed to save Jimmy Richards?" asked Byers. He nodded at Stroud.

"Who—me?" stammered Liam Stroud, overwhelmed. "Why, Sheriff, you know my record and that I'm still—"

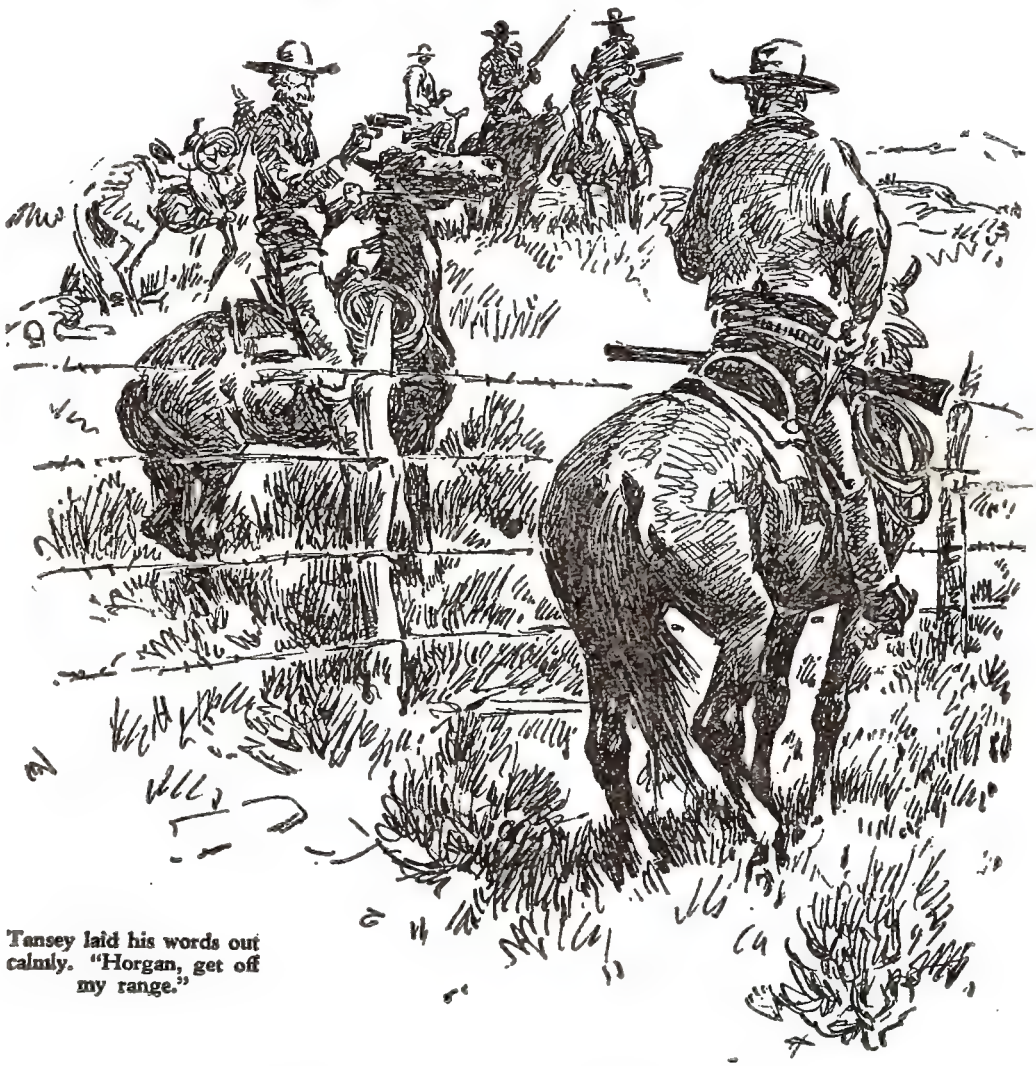
"The Senator and I," said Byers, "will see to it that you get a full pardon. You shot that rancher in self-defense, years ago. You take the job, Liam. They couldn't get a better man."

Liam Stroud straightened. The bitterness and the loneliness that had set him apart from the world had suddenly vanished.

THE END

FAREWELL, FREE RANGE!

By Rod Patterson



Tansey laid his words out calmly. "Horgan, get off my range."

CHAPTER ONE

Trouble at Rafter K

WHEN the train from Goliad churned its black smoke southward over glittering rails, leaving the small red depot on the prairie, it also left a lone passenger standing on the hot cinders under a bright, down-streaming sun. He carried a faded blanket roll and a warbag; his wrinkled brown coat was folded under his arm and a bleached gray hat was pushed back on his head.

Heat rose from the wide, empty street nearby in quivering waves, so that the drab false-fronts of the buildings opposite seemed to

The summons that sent Van Keeler high-tailing back to the Rafter K made it imperative that he discover why range-greedy Harv Remington was so anxious to go broke.... Then Van would know Big Bull Horgan's deadly secret—and would damned well wish he didn't!

Dramatic Saga of the Cattle Wars

dance a little, and that apparent vibration was the only visible motion. The stranger, lean, tall and not over thirty, paused to survey his surroundings with grave and rather skeptical blue eyes. He wore his store-bought shirt and trousers with a palpable air of discomfort, the stiff uneasiness of a man unaccustomed to any garb more formal than vest and leather chaps.

Paused for a moment on the depot's hot runway, he settled his luggage at his feet and drew a well-thumbed letter from his hip pocket. He read it through carefully for the twentieth time in as many days. Scrawled in a masculine and almost illegible hand, its context was sufficiently restrained to sound ominous:

Dear brother Van:

You been away so long I sure hate to bother you like this and wouldn't only I need your help. Fact is there's a range-grab on the make out here. For one thing, I can't keep a crew over a week, since one of the boys got killed about a month ago, and somebody's been pot-shotting at us nearly every day. I suspicion it's Harvey Remington, who took over the old Oak spread three years ago, but I can't prove nothing on him yet. He *has* got a couple of shady gents on his payroll, though, and I got a hunch it's them that's making a damned turkey-shoot out of Rafter K. You better skally-hoot back home and give me a hand with this mess.

As ever,

Greg Keeler

P.S.: The sheriff at Paradise is a big-bellied fool afraid of his own shadow.

Van Keeler tucked the letter away, frowning. The postscript troubled him even more than the contents of his brother's letter, for he knew that, in this flat, brown Texas land, typical of any lonely range, no man ever spoke of legal boundary lines until an unscrupulous outfit began crowding into his grass; and then it was futile to look in law books or deed records—futile to appeal to a chair-bound political appointee when disaster could so rapidly outrun what little law the country had.

He had at first been reluctant to quit the riding job he had in far-off Wyoming, but careful consideration of the situation had finally helped him make up his mind. As a matter of fact, pure self-interest demanded that he return to the home ranch, for half of Rafter K belonged to him, although Greg, his older brother, had been the one who operated the lay-out for eight years or more, while he, Van, had roamed. And furthermore, knowing Greg as he did, his pride and self-reliant ways, he realized that his brother would never have sent out a distress call unless the circumstances were more critical than they seemed on the face of it.

Van heaved his sugans over his shoulder, gripped the battered handle of his warbag, and sauntered across the intervening dust toward a two-storied building with a double-decker gallery which bore the sign: PARADISE HOTEL & BAR.

A sudden flurry of sound disturbed the sun-baked tranquility of the town. A stage coach, hauled by four raw-boned Spanish mules and rocking on the leather straps it used for springs, came clattering down the street apparently having emerged out of thin air. The rig pulled up before the hotel's lower gallery with a screech of dry brake shoes and a high-pitched, "Who-o-oa!"

Van approached the dust-bespattered stage and circled the rig in time to intercept the driver, a wiry little man in jeans and wampus shirt, who dropped the mail sack he was toting and replied to Van's inquiry in a twanging, nasal voice. "Hopewell Junction? One dollar, stranger. I'm pullin' out soon's I git the mail and me a drink." He winked, gave a cackling laugh, and went on into the hotel.

Van tossed his luggage up to the railed deck of the coach, then patiently settled down to wait. With his shoulders propped negligently against the rear baggage boot, he made a cigarette while he surveyed the town and its environs, checking off the familiar objects that met his eye.

A few short blocks away the single dusty street petered out onto the huge tan plain, and the stage road was visible in the foreground but vanished behind a dip in the rolling land, beyond which, five miles onward, it reappeared and ribboned off into the blue heat-haze on the horizon. Close at hand were the town's dingy-looking shops and two delapidated hide warehouses. Opposite the hotel stood the Sundance County Courthouse, a squat gray building with a red-painted cupola and a mud-walled single-celled jail adjoining. Named by its hardy founders in either caprice or downright irony, the town of Paradise was a windy, dust bedeviled community [illegible] hundred souls in the middle of a [illegible] of grass and alkali.

SWIFT footfalls on the nearby cinder walk drew Van's attention and he turned his head, flipping his cigarette into the street. He saw a girl and a man moving toward him and something urgent in the girl's stride and expression pricked his curiosity and made him stare. She was quite pretty in a thin way, with dark brown eyes and hair and a lithe figure which, he saw, was simply clothed in a faded duck jumper and cowboy's blue jeans. She was almost running, even in this incredible heat.

The man, a pace or two behind the girl, almost was running too. He was young, rail-thin, and was dressed like any ordinary cowpoke, except that his hat had once been a pure white. Now, however, it was sweat-stained and smudged with dust and was worn at a raffish angle on his sorrel-colored head.

They had reached a point about fifty feet from where Van Keeler stood behind the stage when the girl stopped suddenly and confronted the man who was pursuing her.

"Chappie, please!"

The man caught her by the arm, roughly pulling her around. "Aw," he said in a wheedling voice, "come off it, Kay! Shucks, Bull Horgan ain't the only man around!"

"Quit pawing me!" She flung his grip off angrily, then jerked about and came on toward Van, her boot heels crunching the cinders.

Van noted the sweetness of her finely mold-

ed face, its look of loneliness, the dark desperation in her eyes. And he obeyed his first impulse. He left the rear of the stage with a single long stride and stepped to the walk in front of her. She slackened her pace, seeing him, and whipped herself aside, stepping behind him.

He turned his head. "Miss, you want I should—"

He didn't finish it because now the man called Chappie arrived, and Van felt a hand fall on his shoulder. He was spun around by the impact, and found himself staring into a pair of greenish, angry eyes. "Mind your own damn' business, you—" It was a fighting challenge the way he said it.

Van's arm came out with a hard thrust, and his right hand seized the man's knotty wrist. He gave a violent wrench on that wrist, and Chappie whooped with unexpected pain. He fell abruptly on his knees, his head thrown back. Then Van let go and cuffed him flat-handedly in the face three times, and threw him backward to the walk. Chappie's hat fell off and his streaky hair flopped across his forehead, and he lay where he fell, all the fight knocked out of him.

The girl saw it all, stunned, gasping with excitement. "Oh," she cried, "I—didn't want him hurt! He—I—" She didn't wait to finish it, but whipped herself around, stampeding up the hotel steps to vanish behind the double screen doors. Van turned his head and watched the screen doors fan the air behind her. "Well, I'll be—"

Chappie was struggling dazedly to his feet, casting about for his fallen hat, one hand clapped to his jaw. There were other sounds on the street suddenly. Van brought his gaze back and saw a man with a copper star on his flapping vest coming across from the courthouse corner with the flat-footed plop of a fat man trying to run.

"Here!" the fat man wheezed, lurching up on the walk. "I seen you knock him down!"

Van hardened his mouth with a slow, sardonic grin. "Why didn't you butt in before, constable, when Chappie was annoyin' the young lady?"

"Constable!" yelped the fat man, his eyes blinking furiously from their moist pockets of pink flesh. "Feller, you're talkin' to Sheriff Griggs!"

"'Scuse me," Van said with heavy irony. "Is Chappie here a pard of yours?" He motioned to the spot where the thin man had been a moment before, but he had gone, sliding down a nearby alleyway.

"Look'a'here," the sheriff cried indignantly. "I got a mind to run you in!"

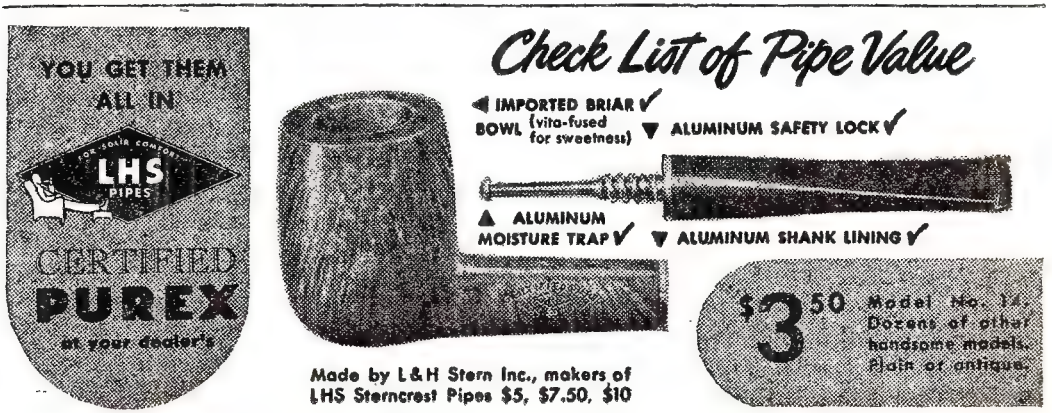
"Don't get your bristles up, sheriff." Van turned his back and went over to the stage coach, whose driver was clattering at that moment down the hotel steps, dragging a sack of mail over the planks.

"'Board!" the driver sang out, seemingly uninterested in the scene before him. "I had three drinks," he grinned at Van, revealing a mouthful of broken yellow teeth.

Van paid his fare and climbed to the driver's high front seat where he settled himself on the faded cushions, ignoring the sheriff.

A moment later, the driver hit the seat, grabbed up the lines and yelled at the dozing mules. The double team started with a jerk and went out of town at a gallop. Van sighed, watching the first familiar clumps of mesquite and post oaks roll by. He felt a vague uneasiness, now, as he thought of his brother Greg, of the letter that had brought him over a thousand miles by rail and river boat to these West Texas plains. Now his journey was near an end, but the uncertainty of wondering what Greg would have to say to him when he arrived at Rafter K was more than disquieting to a man who had become used to loneliness, to a reliance on his own resources, his solitary whims.

THE stage clattered on through the intense heat of the midsummer day, and paused at Barbary Creek, the first way station, to pick


YOU GET THEM ALL IN
LHS PIPES
CERTIFIED
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at your dealer's
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IMPORTED BRIAR BOWL (vita-fused for sweetness)
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up one passenger and a brass-bound trunk, afterward turning into the grassy hills to the southwestward, Van had maintained a stolid silence throughout the first leg of the trip, but now he spoke casually to the driver at his side.

"Ever hear of an outfit called Rafter K?" he inquired.

The driver spat tobacco juice. "Who ain't? Uster be the biggest spread in Sundance Valley. Man name of Keeler ran white-faces on Rafter K. Nobuddy's seen Greg Keeler lately—keeps pretty much to hisself. You acquainted with him?"

"Some."

"I hear there's trouble in the valley," the driver commented. "Some say it's goodby to free grass and all the old-time spreads. Some blackleg outfit's been pushin' theirselves and others out." He sighed. "Don't know what this country's comin' to, stranger."

"Neither do I," agreed Van, impatient and troubled now.

They reached Hopewell Junction, a huddle of adobes on the prairie where two trails crossed. Van bid the driver *adios,* grabbed his luggage down from the deck and hit the rutted road that forked off to the westward toward the low-lying, timber-stippled hills and Rafter K. He came in sight of the homestead ranch along toward four o'clock, limping through the inch-deep dust on weary, burning feet.

Rafter K, its log-sided house and outbuildings and peeled-pole corrals, lay at the extreme rim of Sundance Valley in the mouth of a black canyon. Van spotted the silver glint of the wind mill first, then the weathered logs and stone chimney of the house where it sat on rising ground with the deep, dark green of pines and firs in back of it. Topping a rise, he also saw two buzzards rise and flop out of the bare yard and coast into the canyon. At about the same juncture, he saw a pair of coyotes look up near the ranchhouse gallery, then start sliding for timber.

It was a bad omen to the man who was returning to the ranch where he was born, the spread he had called home for so many years. And so he made the last hundred yards at a kind of half-run, driven by an urgency to hear his brother's voice and shake his hand again. Dropping his baggage in the yard, he hurried to the front gallery. The door was closed and locked. All the windows on the gallery were drawn and fastened. The house, the yard, the canyon, the timber, were silent. It was like a ghost ranch; there was no sound or movement anywhere.

There was no smoke from the chimney, no nickering of horses in the corral which he could see was empty and beginning to sprout bloodweed. He stood still, listening, his uneasiness growing into quick alarm. He called Greg's name, but only the echo came back to mock him hollowly. Deeply worried now, he made his way to the rear of the house. What he found stopped him, staring, cold and physically ill. It was the sight of a gun belt hanging from the edge of the pump shelf near the kitchen door. He advanced, still staring, lifted the heavy weapon in its holster, turned it slowly in his hands. There was a silver-studded monogram on the brush-scuffed leather: "G.K." He drew the pistol out, examined it with mounting dread. Tiny spots of rust speckled the loading gate. It was Greg Keeler's gun; and it had been hanging out here in the weather for days, perhaps weeks!

Slowly, gingerly carrying the weapon, he returned to the front gallery, troubled, fearful, dreading what he might find around the next corner. He drew a pair of keys from the end of a lanyard around his neck. One of them he fitted into the heavy lock, then quickly opened the door. The house, for the most part, was surprisingly clean, except for a layer of dust on the old-fashioned furniture and marble-topped tables. In the kitchen, however, he found confusion. Chairs had been overturned; pots and kettles were scattered about the rough pine floor. Some flour had been spilled on the cook stove and on the hearth. The table, set for one, still held a plate with dried-up remnants of food on it.

He had no trouble reconstructing part of what had happened here. There had been a scuffle, brief but vicious; the flour had been tracked about the floor; and a heavy object had been dragged through it toward the door. He saw the prints of hob-nailed boots on the pine boards and farther out on the rear porch, when he unlocked and opened the door, were several dark stains. Moving back through the house, he had his moment of grim boreboding and, added to this feeling, a sense of mounting rage and helplessness. Afterward he went out and brought his luggage in, taking his shaving things from the warbag. His folded gun belt he took from his bed roll and strapped about his waist. Greg's weapon he hung on a peg behind the living room door, then left the house and looked up. He made a quick inspection of the corrals and outbuildings, then turned and hit the trail through the canyon with the crimson glory of a Texas sunset in his eyes.

CHAPTER TWO

Mystery at Big Hat

TRAMPING wearily into the broad bare yard of Dudley Wilkins' big cow spread which adjoined Rafter K on the west, Van

found the owner, a stocky, sun-blackened man of fifty, taking his ease on the shady gallery, smoking an after-supper pipe. Two of Dud's crew lounged on the steps; and all three men watched the stranger approach without much interest. But Van's first words changed the look of mild curiosity on their faces.

"I was wonderin'," Van said in his quiet Texas drawl, "if anybody here knows anything about Greg Keeler. I just come from Rafter K, but he wasn't home, and the place looks kind of closed up."

"Who's askin'?" Wilkins inquired, a sharpness cutting through the reserve of his hazel eyes.

Van thought swiftly. "Slim," he said in the same slow tone. "Slim Sickles. I'm a friend of Greg's."

"I don't know where Greg is, if he ain't to home," Dud Wilkins stated with some truculence. "Last time we seen him he was huntin' strays up near the Pot Holes.

"Where's he holdin' his herd?" Van asked off-handedly.

"What herd?"

Van narrowed his gaze on the ranchman's [illegible] face. "Then maybe he's done sold off beef?"

"Maybe," Dud said shortly. "I wouldn't know."

Van said, blandly, mildly: "How far is it to Big Hat—Harv Remington's spread?"

Dud frowned. "You a friend of Harv's, too?"

"Never met the gent," Van told him curtly.

Dud eyed him up and down, let his cold gaze touch on Van's low-slung gun a moment before he said, "Keep goin' west. Big Hat's about six mile down the trail."

"Thanks." Van shifted his folded coat from one arm to the other, swung around and headed for the trail again. He left a silence that was almost palpable enough to hear behind him on Dud Wilkins' gallery. *They know more about Greg than they let on,* he grimly thought. And now he recalled the stage driver's innocent, though somehow ominous remark: "Some blackleg outfit's been pushin' folks around down there. Don't know what the country's comin' to." *I'll have another talk with Wilkins later on,* Van decided as he trudged on through the dust.

He came to Big Hat Ranch at sundown, with purple and lavender shadows collecting on the plain. Harv Remington's spread sprawled over the side of a long slope, with the main house on top; and below it the barns, corrals, bunkhouses and a dozen or so miscellaneous outbuildings seemed to spring up out of the ground in front of Van as he limped through the high arched gateway and stopped.

The reason for his sudden halt was the sight of a girl with brown hair and eyes and wearing a pink gingham dress who was picking hollyhocks in a dried-up garden behind a picket fence on his right. It was the same girl he had seen at Paradise earlier that day, the girl whose companion, Chappie, he had tangled with.

Van pulled his faded hat off his sandy head and greeted the girl with some surprise. "Howdy, miss. You live here?"

She covered her shock with a friendly smile, although the look of sadness still remained on her face. "Yes, I'm Kay Remington. Were you—are you looking for a job?"

"You think I'll stand a chance?" he asked.

"No," she answered candidly, then let her glance waver as he grinned at her. "Not after the way you treated Chappie Ford. But I'll speak to my father if you want me to—only I'm afraid it won't help much."

"Thanks," he said. "I can do my own talkin'."

She inclined her dark head with its crown of wind-blown curls. "You'll find father over there." She pointed with a slim, brown-fingered hand. "In the office."

He looked and saw the L-shaped end of the house, a door and a cobwebbed window. "Much obliged," he said, and putting his hat on, started walking across the yard.

A kind of grim tranquillity had settled over him by the time he reached the office door and had knocked on it. He had been compelled to lie his way this far, for he needed the protection of anonymity if he was to continue his search for Greg. For the time being, he decided, he would leave Rafter K to its ghosts; later on he could move in and take possession. Besides, if Greg was alive, he would eventually return. If however, he was dead, the victim of foul play, Van shrewdly knew that his murderer would turn up in time to claim the ranch buildings and the range that belonged to Rafter K.

No answer came to his first knock on the office door, and he was about to rap again when a voice in the yard behind him drawled, "Was you lookin' fer Bull Horgan, friend?"

Van looked around and into the thin and somehow timid face of a lanky young cowpoke who had come up on silent feet in back of him.

"Who's Bull Horgan?" Van wanted to know.

"The foreman," the cowboy said with a tentative smile. "But Harv Remington's in there—I seen him go in a while ago."

Van shrugged, turned to the door and opened it. He was in a small, dusty, bare-walled room with two windows, and furnished with a roll-top desk and three straight-backed chairs. One of the chairs in front of the desk was filled with the scrawy form of an

old man, almost bald, with a wry, leathery face and bleached gray eyes. He had been sitting with his head in elbow-propped hands as Van walked in, but now he looked up, blinked rapidly, and said, "What was it you wanted?"

"I'm lookin' for a ridin' job, sir," Van told him quietly. "You need a good rope hand?"

Harv Remington blinked again, once or twice. Then he sighed, "You wouldn't wanta work for me, stranger. Nobody ever does. Unless—"

"My name's Sickles—Slim Sickles. From Amarillo," Van said. He softened the stern line of his mouth with a grin. "What was you goin' to say, sir? Nobody ever wants to work for you unless—?"

OUTSIDE in the ranch yard there was a sudden rush of hoofs. The sound cut abruptly across Van's words and the old man behind the desk went rigid, and something very like a cloud dropped over his deep-lined face. Van turned to look out through the wide-open door and saw a party of three riders pull up in the yard. Swinging awkwardly down from his saddle was a huge man with a bloated, big-jowled face and tremendous, bearlike shoulders. While the man's two companions dismounted and led the sweat-streaked horses off out of sight, Van watched the big man come rolling on pile-driver legs toward the office. The next moment the fellow lounged through the doorway, bringing sweat-smell with him and the offensive reek of a whisky breath.

Harve Remington spoke in a repressed tone from the desk: "This here's Bull Horgan, my —er—foreman. Bull, meet Slim Sickles. He wants to work fer us."

"Oh, he does, hey?" Horgan swung his tremendous bulk and stared red-rimmed eyes at Van. His course, veined cheeks dripped sweat, and he swiped a hairy hand across his slack-lipped mouth. He wore a heavy gun belt around his ponderous thighs, but it seemed to be there as much for a support for his paunch as for the weapon it carried to one side. He was a big man and he had a big, bull voice which beat unpleasantly against Van's ears. "Where you hail from, Sickles?"

"Amarillo," said Van, meeting that blustering stare unflinchingly.

Horgan moved a step closer. "You on the dodge?" he demanded in the same big, booming tone.

Van shook his head. "Just travelin' through."

Horgan leered. "None o' my damn' business, hey?"

"None of your damned business," Van agreed levelly.

Horgan seemed balanced suddenly between anger and laughter. The scales tipped to the latter. "All right, pard," he roared, and reached out a hot, moist hand. Van's fingers felt dead in that tremendous, crushing grip, but he did not flinch. Nothing more than a brief knotting of jaw muscles disturbed the habitual taciturnity of his face.

Horgan stepped back, squinting his reddish eyes, sizing the other up deliberately. "You tote a hogleg, I notice. Can you use it as well as wear it?"

"Maybe," Van replied.

"No 'mebbe' about it," the foreman boomed in his self-important voice. "You work for Big Hat you got to be able to shoot."

"Take it easy, Bull!" It was Harv Remington who put the protest in a shrill, complaining tone. "We don't know who he is, and—"

"Oh, shut up, Harv!" Horgan waved him down scornfully. Then he said to Van: "Come on down and meet the boys and pick yourself a hoss."

They walked out into the yard with the old man scurrying worriedly after them. There they met the young cowpoke with the thin, rather timid face, and Horgan said, "This here's Cole Stuart, Slim," then lumbered ward down the sloping path toward the bunkhouse on the flats below.

Van nodded to Stuart, caught the cowboy's furtive wink, then followed the foreman, with Harv Remington still trailing on behind. It was almost dark, but there was enough daylight for Van to see the four men who were hunkered down on a bench in front of the tin-roofed bunkhouse they approached. Now their faces swam up out of the shadows.

Horgan jerked his massive head toward Van as they came up and stopped. "Boys—Slim Sickles." He grinned at Van. "That first one's Montana. Next, Nolly Pine, Ed Monday and Chappie Ford. You'll bunk in there with 'em."

Van wasn't prepared for what happened next. Chappie came to his feet from the end of the bench, his face lifting toward Van, his shoulders cupping forward with a jerk that carried him half way to the spot where Van stood. For a breathless moment Van wasn't certain whether the man was going to draw his gun or charge. He didn't wait to find out.

As Chappie lowered his head, Van, who had drawn closer to the group on the bunkhouse bench, walking loosely, negligently, suddenly blew up. His left fist clipped Chappie under the ear, and Chappie spun like a corkscrew on thin legs and dropped where he stood.

It was like a signal to the three men on the bench. All three left it as though catapulted. But Van swung hard to the right and belted Montana on the chin and the chunky

puncher toppled like a cut-down tree. Ed Monday, a ruddy-faced, slant-eyed man, stopped short, gaping, stunned into inaction until it was too late to charge or cover up. Van hit this man twice and flattened him against the bunkhouse wall, where he slid down to a sitting position with his mouth open, his chin on his chest.

Before Chappie Ford could get up from the ground, Van had wheeled and had ducked Nolly Pine's wild swing; now he pulled back and sent Pine kicking to the dust with a round-house blow that sounded like the flat of a cleaver slapping a hunk of meat. Van whirled and tripped up Montana as he tried to rise. For a moment afterward the air seemed full of flailing arms and legs, and dust boiled in the yard and the shadows were filled with angry yells and oaths. Van had his back to Bull Horgan; he didn't risk looking that way; he had to gamble on the big man's surprise to keep him out of the fight, because suddenly two of the downed men were on their feet again.

MONTANA was the first one up. Van climbed all over him, drove him back to the dust with a quick, down-slapping blow to the face. Ed Monday doubled up with a yelp from a fist in the stomach. Nolly Pine yipped, "No-o-oh!" and fell on his hands and knees and tried to crawl away. Van jumped him, turned him over on his back, with his elbows across his face to protect himself.

A woman's scream lanced the silence then and Harv Remington yelled, "Watch it, Slim—look out!"

Chappie Ford, coming from behind, sprang on Van's back, but he side-stepped and ducked his shoulders hard. Then he turned and brought his fist up under Chappie's chin with a bone-cracking jar. Chappie sat down hard in the dust and closed his eyes and groaned.

Breathing from the base of his lungs, Van turned slowly toward Bull Horgan. The foreman was staring at his fallen men, pop-eyed. Near him was Harv Remington, a twisted look of triumph on his deep-seamed face. Still farther back in the shadows stood Kay Remington, wide-eyed, terrified; she was staring at Van, but did not speak.

It was Bull Horgan's heavy, booming voice that ended the dead silence in the yard. "Slim," he said admiringly, "I don't savvy what started this, but if you c'n handle a six-gun like you kin your fists, you'll be a man to ride the river with!"

"A blasted whirlwind," breathed old Harv Remington, "couldn't move so fast!"

Van flexed the fingers of his throbbing hands. "Maybe," he murmured, "it was all my fault. You see, I had a little trouble with Chappie in town today. I guess when he saw me here he figured I'd trailed him to finish it."

Chappie, sitting in the dust, shook his head and held it with his hands. "Go 'way," he moaned. "Go 'way an' leave me be!"

"Well," Bull Horgan said, relieved, "we'll have no more fightin' or whittle-whangin' here. We got work to do—no time for foolishness. You all understand?"

Chappie Ford, his face screwed up in pain, nodded, but the others were in no condition even to comprehend what had hit them. They remained in various stages of unconsciousness, sprawling in the dust.

"Come here, Slim," Harv Remington cried. "I want you to meet my daugher Kay. She—"

"Never mind," Horgan interrupted gruffly. "All right, Slim. We'll pick you out a hoss to use, and then we'll go up and eat."

Van watched Kay turn reluctantly to follow her father up the path, and he heard Bull Horgan call after her, "See you after supper, Kay." Now, suddenly, he was walking with the foreman toward the corrals, noting the bearlike, shambling stride, the hulking frame; and he was adding up facts that were at hand. One thing was fairly certain: for some reason, Bull Horgan did not want him to get on speaking terms with Harv Remington's daughter.

Van chose a rangy-looking sorrel out of the Big Hat remuda, and Horgan led the way to the tack room where, by lantern light, Van picked a high-cantled Meaney saddle. On the path to the house, the foreman suddenly asked, "What was you and Chappie wranglin' about in town?"

Van passed it off lightly. "He tried to bump me off the walk, is all. I spilled him."

"Oh." Horgan's tone was affable, but Van thought he detected a note of disbelief, of suspicion.

WHILE he waited for the iron triangle announcing supper, Van strolled about the yard, looking the place over with a practiced eye. He remembered the house when Old Man Oak had built it, fifteen years ago. Now, however, wind and sun had got under the paint. All the visible wood was the drab and faded gray of old buffalo skulls. He walked past the front gallery, glancing into the lamplighted living room. Harv Remington was sitting in a chair in there, staring vacantly at the wall. Van wondered about the old man, what the real situation was here at Big Hat. At the far end of the gallery he met the girl. She emerged from the shadows beneath the down-slanting roof as though she had been watching for him.

"I'm glad you got the job," she said simply.

"Why?" Van stopped, looking up into her sad face through the darkness. "You never saw me before today."

Her voice came to him softly, warmly: "I know. But Father likes you and he—well, he may need a man like you around to—"

When she didn't finish, he said, gently, "Yes?"

She seemed suddenly embarrassed. "Oh, nothing. Only I—I hope you can keep the job."

They both heard the iron clanging of the triangle then, but neither made any move to leave. Van said, respectfully, "I'd sure like to call some night and have a talk if you—"

"Never mind any talk," a heavy voice said in back of Van. It was Bull Horgan who had come around the corner of the house with a stealthiness surprising in a man of his bulk. "Slim, you better stick to business, and leave the talk to me." The foreman was standing a yard or two away, regarding Van with his red eyes, redder than ever now, somehow, in the semi-darkness.

"You kin go in now, Kay," he said to the girl, then waited until she had moved off into the house. When the door had closed softly behind her, Horgan advanced on Van, his heavy jaw thrust out aggressively, his eyes squeezed tight. His right hand came out and became a fist with Van's shirt-front twisted up in it. "Listen, mister," he said through the fumes of a whisky breath, "don't leave me ketch you hangin' around Miss Kay again. I got my plans for her and you ain't included in 'em—savvy?"

Van made no effort to disengage himself from the big man's grip, and he did not speak although the impulse traveled along his nerves to bash a fist between those little, red-rimmed eyes.

Horgan loosened his fingers and let his arm come down. Van saw the slow, sly grin then, and heard him say, "Miss Kay an' me are figurin' to git hooked up."

"Yeah?"

"A slim gal," Horgan leered. "I like 'em slim."

Van held his temper in. "You got an understandin'?" he finally asked.

"Well," Horgan admitted confidentially, "not exactly that. But she ain't goin' with anybody else, an' I kin wait." He slapped Van on the back. "Let's go an' eat."

Van ate with the rest of the crew in the mess shack lit by chain-hung oil lamps. For the most part, the men sullenly ignored him, but he felt Horgan's eyes on him constantly. Cole Stuart sat on his left and did not speak throughout the meal. When it was over, the foreman sat back from the table and held his paunch while he hiccoughed, whereupon he rose and said, "You boys better turn in early. We leave 'fore sun-up for that fence job at Injun Wells. Take your rifles and plenty of shells because John Tansey may give us some trouble. Montana, you'll have to git your sleep when the job's done. I'm sendin' you on ahead with the fence posts an' the wire." He turned and strode arrogantly into the house.

"Horgan," Van commented dryly, "is goin' to bust his surcingle if he keeps on swellin' up."

Chappie Ford glared across the table, a malicious glint in his greenish eyes. "What Bull'll bust won't be his surcingle—it'll be your damn head when he finds out you been makin' sheep eyes at Kay."

Van returned the cold stare indifferently. "When I get ready," he said with an edge of malice in his voice, "I'll tell him I had to smack *you* down for bully-raggin' Kay."

Chappie turned pale and swallowed hard. His eyes flicked guiltily to the faces of the crew, then fell away. "Never mind," he mumbled bitterly, "I was only hoorawin' you."

CHAPTER THREE

First Blood!

WHEN the crew had filed out of the mess shack, Van glanced at Cole Stuart who had for some reason remained behind. "Well," Van murmured, "what's on *your* mind? You been tryin' to tell me somethin' ever since I walked in here this afternoon."

"Who, me?" Stuart gave a start, his pale eyes widening on Van's still face. Then, he laughed weakly, said, "Oh, that? Well, I was jest tryin' to be friends with you."

Van eyed him closely, carefully, wondering how far he dared go with this anemic-looking youth. He made a snap decision then, and blurted, "Come on, Cole, give your tongue some exercise, but make it short. What's goin' on 'round here?"

Stuart slid his glance around the room, then to the doorway through which Horgan had gone a moment before, and finally to the outside door, where the crew had gone. He put his thin hands on the table, leaning over it. "It's the darnedest thing," he said in a sibilant, hurried tone, "but Harv Remington's doin' his damnedest to go broke! And Kay's helpin' him every way she can! Why, Slim, the old boy is spendin' his money like a cowpoke on a week-end jag!"

"For what?" Van asked.

"Everythin'! He bought a surrey the other day that set him back four hundred bucks—a team of Morgans for fifteen hundred. He's got a threshin' machine and a steam engine to run it, and a corn-cutter he'll never use 'cause this here ain't no farm, it's a cattle spread!"

"I was under the impression," Van commented, "that it was. Got any notion why

Harv Remington's so set on goin' broke?"

Cole leaned closer, his thin hands knotted on the table's edge. "I'm damned if I know!" he breathed.

"How come Bull Horgan's got so much to say?" Van asked.

"He gave the old man a big talk about what a good foreman he was," Cole said. "That was six months ago. After he and Chappie was here a while, Bull started runnin' things. I figured to quit a month ago, but I been a-skeered to go." He squinted his pale eyes at Van. "You a gun-slinger?"

Van shrugged and softly said, "Why ask me that?"

"Because," Cole told him tensely, "you got to be if you're goin' to ride in Horgan's crew. He's spreadin' Big Hat to hell and gone! In six months more there won't be a mile of grass in Sundance that won't be grazin' Big Hat beef!"

Van dipped a hand in his shirt pocket and brought out the makings, with which he calmly rolled a cigarette. "Shucks, man, ain't that swingin' a pretty big loop? How the devil could Horgan get away with a steal like that?"

"You'll see," the cowboy warned. "I know, because I worked for an outfit called Rafter K, and—"

"Rafter K?" Van's face took on the look of something forged and hammered. "Wasn't that Greg Keeler's spread?"

Cole Stuart nodded emphatically. "I quit Keeler when one of his boys was killed. Somebuddy got him while he was workin' in the corral that day."

"Where's Keeler now?"

"Dunno. I ain't been off the ranch since I come to work. Horgan keeps pushin' me down, and I don't ever ride with him."

Van blew out a slowly rising ring of smoke. He eyed the thin man through it, said, "Cole, you better stick around a while. And don't tell nobody what you just told me. You savvy what I mean?"

THE moon still rode high, silvering the endless, cloudless Texas sky when Bull Horgan banged on the bunkhouse door and yelled: "Roll out, you antelopes! It's time to ride!"

While Van sat on the edge of his bunk and pulled on his boots and a pair of jeans borrowed from Cole Stuart, he thought of the conversation he had had with the pale-eyed puncher. This much he knew: Bull Horgan and his crew had definitely been behind the rawhiding of Rafter K, and were probably responsible for the disappearance of Greg. Furthermore, Harv Remington was determined to bankrupt himself, to lose his ranch, his money, everything, in order to escape the threat Bull Horgan held over his head, whatever it was; and the old man wanted no part in his foreman's schemes to rule Sundance range by expanding Big Hat's holdings far beyond its own legal boundaries.

Also beclouding the whole grim business was Van's conviction that his brother had met foul play, had been cold-bloodedly murdered in his own kitchen after his crew had successfully been dispersed. The one hopeful thought in the picture was that he, Van, had made a friend of Cole Stuart and could call on him for help if and when he needed it—doubtful aid, of course, for the nervous young cowhand might have no real guts when the squeeze came.

After a cold breakfast in the bleak mess shack, a meal during which Bull Horgan kept his own counsel and ignored the rest, all hands trooped down to the corral through the thin moonlight where they saddled and cinched up and hit the trail that twisted away to the northwestward, dropping steadily down to lower ground in the lowlands along Crazy Woman Creek. The old and dying grass slipped by beneath the softly thudding hoofs of the party which consisted, besides Van, of Horgan, Pine, Monday and Chappie Ford. Montana had been sent out hours before with the big spring wagon and its load of fence posts and barbed-wire.

They ran on over the vaguely rutted trail while the first faint streaks of coming dawn tinted the eastern sky. Van's mind, in the cold moonlight, had been busy about this ride he was taking with Horgan's crew. He had no desire to take part in a raid on John Tansey, whom he vaguely remembered as a two-bit ranchman at the rim of Sundance Valley, a slender, mild-mannered man who had somehow survived drought and die-up through the years but now, soon, would face the test of guns and maybe death. Van, however, had been sucked into this raid by circumstances, and would have to bluff his own part out, somehow. Uppermost in his mind at the moment was the need for establishing real trust in the burly foreman, for, in the days to come, he had to be free from suspicion of the crew, and also free from Bull Horgan's vigilance.

Shortly before sunrise, Horgan called a halt at the edge of the dusty hills, about ten miles from the home ranch. He took Chappie Ford and rode on, leaving Van, Ed Monday and Nolly Pine near a motte of willows close to the bed of a dried-up stream.

Van watched the blazing miracle of dawn on the distant peaks while Ed and Nolly settled down to wait and smoke. Along toward five o'clock they all heard the fast-arriving clatter of hoofs in the bed of the stream. Van looked up to see Chappie Ford hurrying in on his big gray horse. Chappie pulled up a moment later, saying: "Come on. Bull's got a camp of Piegan Injuns diggin' post-holes up ahead. It don't take long to knock in a hunderd at a time, but Bull wants everybuddy there if John Tansey should ride in."

Van swung to the saddle and joined the others and trotted with them a mile upstream. The sun came up and was warm on Van's shoulders, but did not warm the chill of apprehension in his heart. They came up off the bed of the stream and saw Bull Horgan sitting his star-faced roan on a bluff ahead. Horgan heard them at the same moment and beckoned peremptorily for them to hurry. Van trailed the others. Topping the rise, they reined up beside the foreman, and viewed the land which the bluff had hidden.

Van saw a small valley that ran diagonally north and south away from the dried-up creek. In the foreground the spring wagon stood, pole down, its team nosing feedbags at the tail. Beyond it, strung out in the middle of the valley, was the new fence-line. Directly below the bluff were fifty or sixty Indians, skinny-looking, all more or less the color of the tan prairie on which they worked. They were small, and the mauls and post-hole diggers which they were wielding energetically looked almost too heavy for them to lift.

Van knew now that all this activity was taking place on John Tansey's range, and that Bull Horgan had previously hired this gang of Piegan laborers from the nearby reservation to throw a boundary fence across part of Tansey's grass. Van marveled at Horgan's nerve, but suddenly it came home to him that the foreman had made the beginnings of this brash fence-play with a minimum of personal risk; for he had, by design, deliberately maneuvered the Indians into a position between the bluff and the quarter from which Tansey and his crew would ride if they came to defend their land.

Above the thudding of mauls and the shrill chatter of the laborers, the sudden far sound of hoofs reached the ears of the men on the bluff. Beyond the immediate rim of hills, to the westward, Van made out a cloud of rising dust. He watched that dun-colored ball roll closer while Bull Horgan suspiciously scanned the surrounding mesquite-studded land.

"It's Tansey," he said, "but don't do anything yet. One of you boys git down and lay in that patch of brush." He pointed to the left toward a clump of chaparral about fifty or sixty feet away.

"Nolly's the best rifle shot," Chappie Ford said in a nerved-up tone.

"Go ahead, Nolly," said Horgan and nodded to Van. "Slim, you stick with us. We'll ride down close to the wire." He swiveled his reddish eyes toward the approaching ball of dust. "When Tansey comes we'll do some palaverin' no doubt. Nolly, if you hear it turn from talk to somethin' else, use the rifle on Tansey."

He lifted a hand and made a down-slapping gesture, then led the others down the slope of the bluff into the valley where the Indians were working. He pointed down the fence-line. "Scatter a little, boys," he barked.

ED MONDAY struck off to the left at once and Chappie and Montana rode to the right and pulled up twenty feet away near the wire. Van sat his sorrel slightly to the rear of Horgan, watching the grin of pleasure crawl slowly over the foreman's perspiring face.

The dust ball which had been visible deep in Tansey's grass now was very close. Van saw the thin black point of the group of riders coming on and once he saw a flash of sunlight against a rifle barrel. All the Big Hat crew had seen it. Nolly Pine ducked into his clump of chaparral to hide and watch. Montana and Chappie, on the right, looked around at Horgan. Ed Monday, on the left, showed a drawn expression on his slant-eyed face.

Van said, "How many in that bunch, Horgan?"

The oncoming group was about a mile away, each man in it now beginning to fan out. "Five," said Horgan in a growling, savage voice.

"Suppose Sheriff Griggs gets the tip on this business?" Van asked guardedly.

Horgan didn't look around at Van. "Griggs is a friend of ours," he said. "And quit askin' fool questions!"

Van fell silent and merely watched Horgan and the Indians who now suddenly began to stir around and gather in small groups along the fence-line between Big Hat and the approaching riders. Turning in the saddle, Horgan bawled some orders, but the little saddle-colored men ignored him. They went on chattering excitedly, staring toward the sound of drumming hoofs.

Horgan rode angrily along the wire, circling, weaving back and forth, trying to whip the Indians into line. Then he gave it up and came back. He made a short signal with his hand, and Van heard the louder scud of horses' hoofs and saw the foreman's big frame stiffen. He caught the outflung echo of Horgan's voice, though the words were not clear.

John Tansey's outfit rushed in, a scatter of gray figures on the prairie. Now they had halted two hundred feet away; and the dust of their running came on across the Piegan and the wire, and moved cloudily over the Big Hat men. Its gray substance touched Van's face and became a bitter taste in his mouth.

There were five men in the party, as Horgan had said. Van had seen two of them before: Tansey himself, and his *segundo*, Chuck Hackhouse. He had known both men casually in the old days. Tansey, a lean, dark man with level eyes, came forward on his black horse with Hackhouse side-riding him, and both men stopped half way to the fence-line. Tansey's face now was gray with strain, and that of his foreman twisted with anger.

Tansey laid his words out calmly, however. "Horgan," he said, "get your Injuns off my range."

Horgan sat still, defiant, with his solid legs pushed straight down against the stirrups. He resembled a sagebrush general, so pompously seated on his roan horse. He was confident, yet plainly restless. "I had this stretch of grass surveyed," he answered heavily. "It's Big Hat range and always was."

"That's a lie!" Tansey replied, still in the same calm tone.

Van sat behind Horgan, motionless, watchful. He held his chin low so that his face was shadowed and flat beneath the brim of his fadded hat, for he had no wish to be recognized by Tansey or Hackhouse.

Now Hackhouse spoke in a loud and angry tone. "Ride out, Horgan!"

Tansey quelled his foreman with an upflung hand. He scanned the faces of the Big Hat crew, an intentness on his own, and his gaze lingered a moment on Van's before he looked back at Horgan and said, "I want no trouble and there won't be any if you pull your Injuns off this range. If you don't, we'll stand and fight it out."

AS THOUGH Tansey's last appeal was a signal a rising rumble of alarm came from the Piegan scattered along the wire. Now, suddenly, without any order from Tansey, the Indians began to move away, dropping their tools where they stood. In the next moment they were scrambling in wild confusion for the chaparral. The break was coming, Van knew, and coming fast. Still he had no wish to join a shoot-out with Tansey's men. He had no alternative, however, but to stand by and hope that Horgan might back down, might finally equivocate. Any hope of this was dashed almost as he thought of it. There was a sudden shifting of riders along the wire. Chuck Hackhouse made the first move. He shouted an oath and grabbed for his gun; and his red horse bumped into Tansey's bay and rushed toward the wire.

One quick sharp shot slapped the silence, but it wasn't Hackhouse's. That shot came from the brush in back of Van, from the spot where Nolly Pine with his rifle lay unseen. Van heard the solid strike of lead in human flesh, saw Hackhouse stand up momentarily in the stirrups and lift his arms. His face tipped up, and he hung poised for the space of a long-drawn breath, then broke at the hips. He bowed his head and toppled sideways out of the saddle. When his limp frame hit the dust he turned over on his back and did not move again.

The metallic echo of the shot ran on into the hills. Then Tansey's gun whipped out, fast; faster than those who watched could have expected. He had already fired two thinly spaced shots at Horgan, from so close it seemed nobody with such steady nerve could possibly have missed, when Montana, on Horgan's right, brought him down out of the saddle with the only shot he fired.

Now Chappie's weapon ripped out and thundered twice, and one of Tansey's men jerked in the saddle and wheeled his horse away.

Van, crouching low on his sorrel, raked the animal with his spurs and circled it and kept digging with his spurs, kept pulling with a tight-drawn rein. The sorrel reared and bucked and wheeled. A bullet from another of Tansey's men sang overhead, and Van ducked and went on slashing with his spurs.

Horgan was bellowing, firing his revolver, while he impossibly survived the fire of Tansey's two remaining men. The next few moments were mad confusion, a swirling of dust and powersmoke, the roar of guns. But Tansey's men were falling back; and Tansey himself was running for his horse, dragging

a crippled leg along the ground. Then all the firing stopped and Tansey and his men were rising to the saddle and fading back into the brush. Tansey's thin cry came back: "All right, Horgan—but remember, this just starts it!"

During the uproar nobody in the Big Hat crew had seemed to notice Van's maneuvers. He had kept shifting and wheeling and rearing to protect himself from Tansey's fire; and he had not even drawn his gun. The reason Horgan and the others had not noticed was their own activity. Now, however, while the taint of powdersmoke and dust still clung to the air, Bull Horgan swung around on his roan, staring hard at Van, the glint of suspicion in his reddish eyes. He held his gun on Van but for a moment did not speak, although the greatness of his desire to kill, to destroy, lingered on his face for Van to read.

CHAPTER FOUR

Grim Discovery

"TALK!" Bull Horgan dropped only that one clipped word, then sat his horse and stared, saturnine, silent, while the moment of tension piled up and became an actual weight on Van.

Van's answer was finally to swing his sorrel partly around to get some sight of the other men. He had a glimpse of Nolly Pine who by now had left his place of concealment and was advancing, rifle in hand, a pleased expression on his doglike face. Van held his horse in with one hand, eyed Horgan deliberately, and said, "The shootin' spooked my horse. Didn't get a chance to draw."

"Oh, yeah?" Horgan said it with an edge of irony. He stared a moment longer, undecided, then put his gun away with a grunt and dismounted cumbersomely and threw his curt command at Chappie Ford.

"Take Ed Hunt up some shovels and dig a grave somewhere."

He made a step toward the spot where the body of Hackhouse lay beyond the wire. "Come on Slim. We'll see if we kin round up them damn' Injuns and get the rest of the fence-line up."

"Too bad it was Hackhouse," Montana murmured, swinging to the ground. "He was a good man."

Horgan said, "Can't make a cake without breakin' eggs." He moved off toward the brush. "Get about it, boys. Get about it!"

Bull Horgan's fence-play had succeeded. He had won the first round of the fight for John Tansey's grass along Crazy Woman Creek and had suffered no casualties. But he had hurt Tansey's outfit. Tansey and one of his men had been hit. Hackhouse was dead. Van now viewed the whole grim business with apprehension and distaste. He was riding with a crew of killers, men who would stop at nothing to get what they wanted.

Riding back to the ranch late that afternoon, Van had his troublesome thoughts: The longer he rode with Horgan's men, the more certain he would be to become involved in their crimes. Yet, feeling the urgency of getting on with his search for some trace of his brother Greg, he had no alternative but to remain at Big Hat and take his chances.

Cole Stuart was waiting at the home corrals when Van rode in with the crew. Van thought he detected a certain quality of excitement in the pale-eyed cowboy, although Cole patently tried to conceal it. He followed Van up to the house and his efforts to start a conversation were so obvious that Van feared Horgan might notice it and become even more watchful than he already was. After supper, while Van was shaving in the bunkhouse, Cole sauntered in and propped a bony shoulder against the door. He whispered, "How'd it go, Slim? What happened out there?"

Van stropped his razor. "Didn't they tell you?"

"They never tell me nuthin', and I never ask."

"Horgan ran a two-mile fence line east of the creek," Van told him. "We tangled with Tansey and his boys and Hackhouse was killed."

Cole drew a sharp breath, but he did not speak.

Van lathered his jaw, worked his razor with short strokes, watched Cole's alarmed face in the mirror. Cole finally asked, "You stickin'?"

Van nodded. "For a while."

"Does Harv know about Hackhouse?"

"I'll find that out," said Van, "soon's I finish here and borrow a clean shirt from you."

"Help yourself," Cole offered, turning to leave. "Let me know what the old man says."

Van walked up to the house a little while later, wearing one of Cole's red wool shirts, his hair slicked down and as black as new paint. He knocked on the front door which was opened at once by the girl. She showed him a strained smile. "Come in, Slim."

He sat down in the first chair he came to, with his hat draped over his knee. Harv Remington sat near the fireplace. He looked upset and nervous. "Hullo, Slim."

The parlor was pleasant by mellow lamplight, with horsehair sofa and chairs and one or two marble-topped tables which held ormolu ornaments and lace doilies. Van looked at Kay, noting her paleness.

He held his hat and said, "Thought I'd come in for a chat."

"Of course," Kay said faintly, "only what about Horgan? Won't he—"

"Slim, you better not." This from the old man in a distressed tone. He looked at Van with a dogged watchfulness. "Bull might hear you, and make it bad for us all."

"I was wonderin'," Van came to the point without delay, "why you don't give Horgan his walkin' papers—why you don't fire those rowdies of his and be done with it?"

"Oh," Harv said in a horrified tone, "I can't do that! I—"

"Why not?" Van embarked on a course he knew he couldn't turn back from. Something in Kay's drawn face, in the old man's harried one, made him go on bluntly. "Harv, your men threw up a fence-line east of Crazy Woman Creek today. There was some trouble with John Tansey and Chuck Hackhouse was killed."

The old man looked as though he had been struck in the face. He cringed back in his chair and gripped its arms with knuckle-whitened hands. Van heard the girl's quick, indrawn breath, heard her come toward him and stop, and he looked up, a gravity in his light-blue eyes. He waited, and she gasped, "Oh, Slim, help us!"

He shrugged. "I can't," he said, "unless you tell me the truth—why Horgan's got you under his thumb."

Her face was convulsed; a glance at the old man revealed the same expression of fear. "We don't dare to call our souls our own," Kay finally blurted out. "Horgan watches us, and when he's not here, Cole Stuart sneaks around, and—"

"You don't have to worry about Cole," Van took a chance and said. "But you ain't told me yet why—"

FOOTFALLS dropped heavily on the outside gallery boards. The door was flung open suddenly and Bull Horgan stomped into the room and stared at the three people before him. His squinting gaze touched Van's face and held there challengingly, suspiciously.

"Slim," he said with elaborate patience, "the fool-killer's goin' to get you yet! What'd I tell you about stayin' away from the house?"

Van remained in his chair, a slackness coming over his lean, clean-shaven face. "I was only bein' friendly," he murmured calmly. "Seems like it's kind of hard to make friends 'round here."

"That's too damn' bad," Horgan answered heavily, "because you're goin' to need friends bad if you keep on crossin' me this way!"

"I hope not," Van said, rising.

Horgan watched with his little slitted eyes. He said, "I'll make sure you 'tend to business, mister. Saddle up in the mornin', take grub for a week and hit for the new fence-line. Cole Stuart'll side you. You'll both stay on the creek till I send for you. You got that straight?"

"I got it," Van said. He smiled at the girl, who wore an aghast expression on her pale face, then wheeled and walked out into the night without another word. With the door shut behind him and as he walked away, he heard Horgan's blustering voice say, "He's only a saddle bum, Kay. I told you that before, so why d'you keep botherin' with him?"

Ten minutes later, in his bunk, Van caught a muffled step at the bunkhouse door. "Who's that?"

"Me—Cole," the reply came in a sibilant tone. The pale-eyed puncher eased into the darkened room. "I was listenin' at the house," he said. "I heerd what Horgan said."

"So?"

"I'll be darn'd glad to git away from here," Cole said heartily, "even if it's on'y for a week!"

"Me, too," Van said. "I got some scoutin' to do and you can help."

"Sure," Cole answered cheerfully as he sat down on his bunk and peeled his trousers off. "G'night."

Van heard the rest of the crew come in some time later but pretended sleep and so heard Montana growl as he hit the straw, "Bull's movin' in at Rafter K tomorra afternoon."

Van did not sleep that night. Montana's seemingly innocent remark had released an avalanche of emotion in him. He had felt from the beginning that he was riding down the right trail in his quest for the killer or killers of Greg, but now, if Bull Horgan moved in at Rafter K, he would have part of the proof he needed, with only the finding of Greg's burial place the final missing fragment of the puzzle. Then he would have something to hit and when that time came he would strike hard and without warning.

Cole Stuart was not in his bunk when Van rolled out at dawn and dressed and buckled on his gun. He found the mild-mannered puncher down at the corrals, where he had saddled up and had loaded a pack bronc with grub and extra blankets. Van greeted him affably and roped his sorrel and threw his saddle on. Both men mounted and rode out through the arched gateway and headed down toward Crazy Woman Creek. They had not seen Horgan—who slept in a room at the main house—and Van was grateful for this respite from the foreman's irritating voice and ways. Besides, the beginnings of hatred burned in him and he feared his own inability to refrain from revealing it by word or look.

Also, he welcomed this chance to get away from the home ranch and from Horgan's vigilant eyes, and he welcomed, too, the opportunity he now had to inspect the nearby range

and the hills abutting it. Furthermore, having Cole Stuart as a saddlemate for the coming week was a stroke of good luck he hadn't expected, for, despite Cole's rather lackluster appearance and character, they had been drawn together by a seeming mutual need for help and confidence.

Traveling Indian-style, with Cole at the rear leading the pack horse at the end of a hackamore, Van passed over the nearby Big Hat range before the sun had fully risen in the rose-tinted eastern sky. They reached the low pine hills, following the warm shadows of early morning, and came out at last on a high ridge from which point they could view all the country. On the west lay Dud Wilkins' range rolling on to a distant stream, crossing it, and continuing to the great dark mountains farther westward. To the south lay Rafter K, lost now in a sea of morning mist.

Cole, still riding behind Van, called out puzzledly: "Hey, Slim, we ain't goin' right for Crazy Woman Creek! That's Wilkins' D-W down there ahead!"

"I know it," Van replied. "Figure to scout around some before we do anything else. Any objections?"

"Hell, no!" the other said emphatically. "On'y Bull may send one o' them rannyhans down to the creek 'fore *we* git there."

"We'll risk it," said Van, and moved down the face of the ridge.

They rode southward toward the Pot Holes, a region of deep ravines and hidden timbered valleys which had always been used by Rafter K during the long dry summers because fresh water springs abounded there. All along these rolling hills Van now began to see scattered bunches of cattle.

Riding in close to some of these grazing groups, he saw that some of it was Big Hat beef and some of it bore the Rafter K with a vent brand on it, which indicated a sale, and with the Big Hat mark under it—indicating that Big Hat had purchased Greg Keeler's stuff in large quantities. But that, Van knew, could be only one way of giving a legal aspect to an outright steal. He was sure Greg had never sold any Rafter K stuff to Big Hat or, for that matter, to any other outfit in the region.

DURING the next half hour of riding he counted roughly about a hundred steers, some bulls and a score of cows with calves. He was not surprised however, for he was finding what he had fully expected to find: Evidence that Bull Horgan had swallowed up everything in this part of Sundance Valley.

Now, suddenly, Van led the way into the rough, broken country that rimmed the flats. He found and took a faint trail that led directly toward Rafter K and arrived, along toward eight o'clock, at a right angled ridge some five or six miles from the ranch itself. He rode straight into the jungle of chaparral and giant sage and some time later reined his sorrel hard, staring to the right.

He was looking into the opening of a gulch whose floor was covered with withered greasewood and sacaton. Cole Stuart, with his pack horse, came piling up in back of him, cursing blandly at Van's unexpected halt.

"What the hell, Slim," Cole murmured. "What the hell!"

"I think there's a man in there—asleep," Van remarked, pointing deep into the gulch.

A big blob of gray stirred in one of the greasewood clumps and turned suddenly into a huge buzzard that unfolded a five-foot spread of wings and went flopping away, skimming the walls of the gulch. Two other gaunt gray shapes rose from the ground nearby and followed the first.

Van tensely drew his gun and dismounted. Cole cried nervously, "Aw, come on! It's only a calf that died in there!"

"Stay here," commanded Van, and he advanced into the gulch on silent feet. He approached the lumpish object in the cup and stopped abruptly, staring, a sickness rising in his throat, his stomach knotting up. A cloud of flies rose buzzingly in the air, then slowly settled as Van's footsteps stopped.

He stared closer through slitted lids, his mouth pulled tight against his teeth. "Greg!" he whispered hollowly, and that was all he said.

Behind him, Cole called anxiously, "What's the matter, Slim?"

Van turned around and moved a pace or two and leaned against a rock and was physically sick. He had to wait a while to get his wind. When he could speak, he looked across at Cole Stuart's harried face and gasped, "It's Greg—it's my brother Greg!"

Cole flinched back, then recovered himself. But the lead rope of the pack horse slipped through his fingers and dropped to the ground. White-lipped, he stared and said, "*Your brother?* You mean—"

Van nodded numbly. He stood motionless, dazed, unable to cope with the shock of his grisly discovery, stunned by the impact of his horror and his grief. Cole Stuart found his wits and scrambled out of the saddle. He approached the dead man tip-toed, as if afraid to make a noise, and stared down with his back to Van. Presently he turned toward Van and Van was able to see the consternation on his pallid face. "He was shot in the head," Cole muttered. "Clean through the head."

Van drew a deep and shaken breath. "He was carried here. There's no blood on the ground," he said, half to himself.

"You goin' to leave him here?" Cole asked.

Van avoided looking at Greg's body again. "Give me a hand and we'll cover him with stones so those—" He couldn't finish, but turned deliberately and cast about the gulch for any rocks that he could lift.

Cole helped him, finally. In twenty minutes they were through. Both men stared at the cairn they had erected. Van's eyes were bleak; Cole watched him furtively and asked, "Who done it, Slim? Oh, hell, your name's Keeler, ain't it?"

"Van Keeler." Van shrugged, the color ebbing back into his face. "I'll find the man that killed him, Cole. You game to stick with me?"

"Why—" Cole stammered out, "—why, sure, I'll stick. What the hell do you think I am?"

Van tried to smile. "You're the only pard I got, Cole, and I sure need one!" He fell silent for a long moment, then began to talk. He told the puncher how he had come all the way from Wyoming after getting a letter from Greg; he went over the details briefly, narrating how he had found Rafter K deserted, of the signs of a fight he had found in the kitchen and Greg's gun hanging on the pump shelf.

When he had finished, he said, "Take the pack horse, Cole, and hit for Crazy Woman Creek like we're supposed to do. When you've set up camp on the fence-line, ride out to John Tansey's and tell him to round up all the help he can and, then high-tail it for Rafter K."

Cole was thunderstruck. "Jeez, Van. I can't do that! Why, man, Tansey'd shoot my damn' ears off 'fore I even got close enough to talk!"

"Tansey don't know you ride for Horgan," Van argued impatiently. "Nobody in Sundance does."

"You can't be sure," Cole insisted, "and I don't want—"

"Get movin'," Van said tersely. "I happen to know Bull Horgan's takin' over Rafter K today!"

"He is?" Cole thought a moment, his forehead furrowed. "Well, all right," he finally agreed. "I'll take a chance." He walked to his horse, grabbed up the lead rope, and swung to the saddle, whereupon he glanced doubtfully back at Van. "You aimin' to head for Rafter K from here?"

Van nodded. "Git, pardner!"

When the clatter of hoofs had faded back into the jungle of brush and lava rock that made the Pot Holes the impenetrable maze it was, Van turned his bleak gaze to the pile of stones that marked the temporary grave of the brother he had loved. He had his secret moment of emotion, now, which was revealed by the quick knotting of his jaw, the gathering of mist before his eyes. Then he shook himself impatiently, and moved out of the gulch with a tight-set mouth; he took up his bridle reins, mounted his sorrel and rode southward toward Rafter K.

CHAPTER FIVE

Under the Chino

VAN came up to the mouth of the home canyon before ten that morning. Even at this hour, fog was a cold steam rolling through the canyon; and the chill and wetness struck through Van's clothing as he rode in between the steep up-and-down walls, passed into a belt of pines, and came out at the rim of the flats where the Rafter K buildings squatted.

According to Montana's overheard remark of the previous night, Bull Horgan and the Big Hat crew would be moving in here sometime during the coming afternoon, but Van had no certainty of this. The burly foreman might change his plans at the last minute, might take over at any time. Van therefore had to be on guard against surprise. Common sense warned him to watch the ranch from a distance; and so he held the horse back in the pines, dismounted, ground-hitched the animal, then went forward to the rim of trees and settled on his heels to wait for the arrival of Cole Stuart with Tansey's crew. He figured they would not come until close to noon, allowing time for Cole to make camp at the creek, then ride on to Tansey's ranch. The trip from Tansey's might take close to an hour.

Always a patient man, Van smoked a chain of cigarettes, finding the waiting now harder than anything he had heretofore had to do. The moments dragged while he thought his bitter, vengeful thoughts. This move he was about to make was the most important he had, or would, ever make. On its success hinged his own future, the settling of the score against the man or men who had murdered Greg. If he failed, he would never again know any peace of mind, for his brother's ghost would speak to him wherever he went, wherever the future might take him. It was a bitterly disturbing thought.

From his position here in the pines, he viewed the front portion of the ranch house, the shady gallery, the windmill, the many-windowed barn. Day's heat increased as the sun climbed over the canyon and glared down on the timber, on the bare deserted buildings in the yard, two hundred yards away. Time passed; the shadows shortened and slowly slid along the ground where Van sat. The complete and eerie silence was like the stillness on the moon; but suddenly it was shattered by the warning racket of a pair of crows on the slopes above. Almost at the same instant, Van

caught the far rhythm of hoofs. The sound grew steadily louder and came from the canyon, and he watched the break in the trees and saw a long file of riders come out finally through the scattered pines. His glance narrowed on the leaders of the band, and from this distance he readily recognized John Tansey and Dud Wilkins, owner of D-W, nearest neighbor of Rafter K.

There were at least fifteen men in the party, all of them armed, and they made a shifting panorama of sweating horses and grim faces shadowed by big hat brims. Rifles jutted from under saddle flaps; holstered revolvers slapped lean thighs. The column passed very close to Van and dipped over a rise into the wide ranch yard.

Van rose to his feet, feeling relief, yet puzzled at the same time. He pulled out his stem-winder and saw that it was only a little after eleven o'clock. It seemed almost incredible that Cole Stuart could have covered all the miles to Tansey's ranch, then come back by way of Dud Wilkins' place in so short a period of time, and yet the two outfits, obviously plus a few men picked up on the way, were here at Rafter K less than two hours after Cole Stuart had left the Pot Holes.

Van checked off a few of the faces he had just seen in his mind. He was pretty sure Cole Stuart had not been in the party at all. Then where had the rangy puncher gone? Had he lost his nerve at the last moment and decided to stay out of the fight he knew must come when Bull Horgan and his crew arrived?

Now Van turned back into the trees, threw the bridle over his sorrel's head and stepped into the saddle, holding the horse in the pines for another moment while he peered down toward the ranch yard. The Tansey-Wilkins outfit had reached the house and now he could see all those men dismounting before the gallery in a cloud of dust; and he touched a spur to his horse and sent it out of the trees into the open, then down the long grade toward the yard.

He openly crossed the flats and rode straight into the yard, sitting high and easy in the saddle. The men in front of the house heard him, saw him come, and their faces turned to him, and John Tansey's showed its shadowed surprise and its alert hostility. But he kept his mouth shut—as did Dud Wilkins—until Van reined up and said, "I wasn't expectin' you for another hour. Where's Cole Stuart?"

Tansey's thin, dark face showed what seemed, to Van, something close to puzzlement. Tansey threw Wilkins a quick look but Wilkins shook his head.

Tansey looked back to Van. "Who was expectin' who?" he growled. "And who the hell is this Stuart you're talkin' about?"

VAN sat with his head bent a bit, his blue gaze angling down at Tansey, at Wilkins, at the grim and sober faces of all these dusty men. He saw the suspicion, the hate in Tansey's hazel eyes, and felt wariness, then alarm, creep slowly along his nerves. He said, "I sent Stuart out to your place about an hour and a half ago."

"I know nothing about it," Tansey said. "But I know one thing. You're one of Bull Horgan's men, and now you're out of luck!"

Vat sat motionless, a dryness in his mouth like alkali. He sensed a sudden movement of the men in front of him. Dud Wilkins' thick-jowled face had darkened up, and now he said, "Git down, mister. We got a lot to do and not much time to do it in."

It seemed to be a signal. Two or three of the riders on Tansey's right stepped farther to the right until Van, now watching Tansey, lost them out of the corner of his eyes. They were somewhere at his left rear; throwing a glance that way he saw them some twenty or thirty feet away.

"Light down," invited Tansey, an eagerness in his voice. There was a gray steadfast certainty on his face, a growing stain of anger on that of Dud Wilkins who stood near him. "Light down," John Tansey sneered, "and git acquainted with the boys!"

Van inched his right hand a little toward the saddle horn; it hung a moment just above his holstered gun. "Cut that out!" Dud Wilkins snapped. "You're covered a dozen different ways!"

This was a wrong guess on Wilkins' part, for only four men had drawn down on Van; four that he could see, that is. He had no way of telling what guns were focused on his back though he could feel a growing chill run up and down his spine.

Van never moved, but his eyes turned bleak and cold. A flash of wildness ran into his eyes, but he did not attempt to draw. He just stared at Tansey and Wilkins with a narrow, blue-eyed steadiness; and he was hard and thin-mouthed and suddenly full of bitter irony.

"You're makin' one big mistake," he said. "My name is Keeler, and I own this spread. You better let me talk."

"Talk, hell!" John Tansey barked it out, his face aflame. "You never let Chuck Hackhouse talk! You shot him down!" He turned his head to a tall, thin rider on his left. "Ruff, get his gun. Then lead his horse over to that tree." He flung a hand toward a Chino which stood at the far corner of the gallery, its leafy boughs touching the roof, arching over the yard.

Ruff, slant-eyed and wary, walked slowly toward Van. He came up and seized Van's gun at one rapid reach and threw it to Tansey who caught it deftly and shoved it behind his

belt, relief coming to his dark, drawn face. Now Dud Wilkins moved forward, and Ruff grabbed Van's bridle and flipped it up over the sorrel's head, and pulled the animal briskly toward the tree.

She pressed around Van; he felt its coolness and shuddered inwardly. But he could not help asking his question, though the answer was plain as death to him. "What are you boys goin' to do?"

"Play cat's cradle with your neck," Dud Wilkins answered in a jarring tone.

Van watched what men he could see; and he deliberately reached to his shirt pocket and drew the makings out. He was very pale, but calm, as he rolled a smoke and said, "A fine bunch of savages! You'd hang a man that's innocent and laugh to see him kickin' out his life!"

John Tansey let out a vituperative yell, and his eyes looked like hot light. He cursed Van bitterly, went on naming off with biting precision all the things he thought Van was. It went like this for several seconds before he ran out of epithets and stopped for breath. He had lifted a hand, knocking back the brim of his black hat, and his iron-gray hair had fallen forward over his forehead and tiny beads of sweat glinted like jewels in the spots of sunlight on his face.

Van had his bad moment, his gray foresight of the trap he was in—it hit him in the stomach and turned him cold and fear ran through him like an icy douche. He made one more try. "I told you I'm Van Keeler, and I can prove that claim."

Dud Wilkins showed signs of weakening. But he said, "You stopped at my place two nights ago on the way to Remington's. Are you denyin' it?"

"No," Van answered, hope rising in his breast. "But I'd just come from here and I was lookin' for the man that murdered my brother Greg."

"Keep still!" John Tansey said furiously, showing Van a hot flash of intolerance. "I seen you ridin' with Bull Horgan's bunch!"

"Yes," Van admitted, "but I never fired a shot."

"You was sidin' the dirtiest bunch this side of the Rio!" Tansey yelled. "That's enough for me!"

Dud Wilkins threw his hands up then. "Ruff, hand me a rope!"

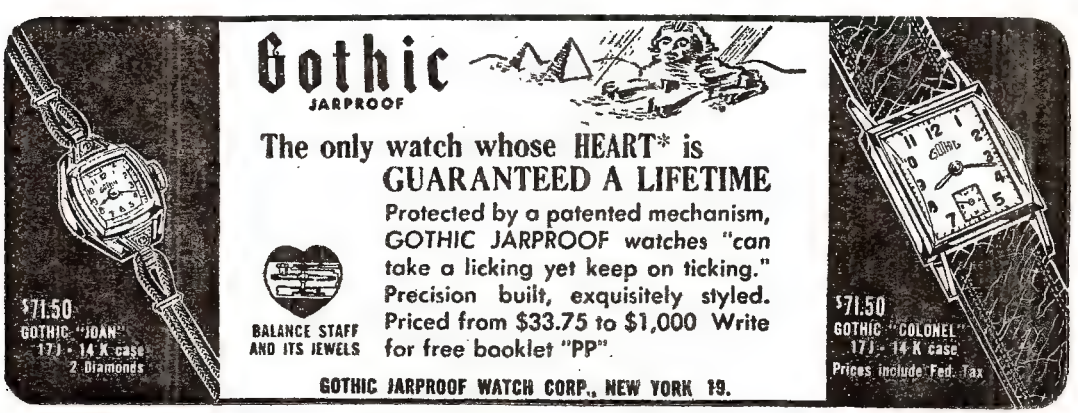
Ruff went over and released the lariat from the thong of Van's saddle. He turned and walked across the gap to Wilkins and handed him the rope. Wilkins hooked it over one arm, keeping his gun hand free; he looked upward at the Chino tree a moment, then back to Van. "Anything else you want to say?"

VAN never blinked an eye. He sat erect in the saddle, his cigarette stuck to his lower lip, the smoke rising in a wavering blue streak into the foliage overhead. "I've got a letter," was all he said, then drew Greg's note from his pocket and tossed it down to Tansey who limped closer on his wounded leg, caught the folded paper and would have torn it up had not Wilkins interfered. "Read it, John. No harm."

Tansey looked scathingly at the stocky man. "If you got no guts you should've stayed to home!" But he opened the letter and stared at it in the manner of a man who will not be convinced, no matter what. When he finished, he handed it to Wilkins who read it cursorily and said, "Hell, anybody could've faked this up!"

Van said quickly, "You'll find my warbag in the house—in the livin' room. And you'll find Greg's sixgun hangin' behind the door." He reached into his shirt-front, unsnapped the lanyard from about his neck and threw it at Tansey. "There's the front door key. Go in and look."

It was a pleasant spot, this Rafter K ranch headquarters, a quiet island in a wilderness of grama grass and timber-stippled hills. A half dozen Chino trees made shade for the house and part of the yard; and the barns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were painted red and stood out sharply limned against the dark deep green of firs and pines. But what had always been an oasis of peace to Van Keeler now had become a purgatory of suspense and fear while Tansey and Wilkins blundered through the house and returned to the yard again.

Van had both hands folded on his saddle horn as the two ranchmen faced him across the dust. There was a blackness on Tansey's face, a rancorous frown on Wilkins', and Tansey threw his words at Van with all the venom he could summon up. "There ain't no bag in there at all! And there ain't no gun!"

It knocked the wind out of Van. He could only stare at Tansey, mouth open stupidly; and all the vitality left his face, leaving it white and blank as wood. He sat still, dazed by Tansey's wrathful statement, then he moved. One moment his lean frame was poised motionless in the saddle; the next he cupped his shoulders convulsively and slashed the sorrel with his spurs. The horse gave a startled squeal and charged straight at the gallery, scattering the riders to right and left. Van cut hard at the bridle and swerved the horse to the right. He rode Dud Wilkins down and saw him fall and cover up. The rest of it was telescoped confusion, with the yells of the ranchmen merging with the rattle of their guns.

Report after report banged in the yard behind Van as he rammed his horse toward the canyon's mouth. Bullets clipped the nearby trees and whanged into the dust beneath the sorrel's flying hoofs. Van clung close to the saddle, bent above the horn, and he flogged the horse unmercifully with his spurs. The gunfire went up to a hammering roar. Then, suddenly, he was over the ridge and whipping through the pines, the sounds of shooting and yelling blotted out by the canyon walls.

Moments later, on a lathered horse, he left the canyon on the north and plunged into the trail-side brush. He road on at a slower pace, cutting deeper into the chaparral. A hundred yards farther on, he ducked into the timber, climbing steadily until he arrived at a point from which he could see the valley and the open range rolling off toward the broken land westward. The trail lay perhaps a thousand feet below him, its dun-colored course making a twisted pattern on the green earth. As he sat there, staring downward, the Tansey-Wilkins outfit came pouring out of the trees near the canyon's mouth. He watched them with mixed emotions of relief and rage, and saw the whole column of riders stream off on the trail and out of sight beyond a distant ridge of hills. Out there a little way, he knew, they would scatter and comb the range for him, gradually working around the hills toward Big Hat where, conceivably, the final battle with Bull Horgan could occur. But this was a slender chance on which to pin his hopes, he realized, and he immediately made up his mind to return at once to Rafter K.

The gravity of his position was plain to him. Now he was on the run from both factions: The Tansey-Wilkins group as well was from Horgan. Cole Stuart was probably hiding in these hills somewhere, afraid to show himself. Van cursed him for his cowardice, and cursed himself for placing any dependence on the man.

Another thought began to plague him suddenly. What had happened to the warbag he had left in the house at Rafter K? And what had happened to Greg's belt and gun? Obviously someone had broken in, had found the bag and the gun, had identified the bag by its contents, and then had removed both to a hiding place. But why had this been done? Could it have been Bull Horgan himself—or one of his cutthroat crew?

IMPATIENCE drove Van suddenly. He put the horse down through the trees over the route he had just climbed a moment before. It took him only ten minutes to reach the valley floor again and make his way through the canyon to the ranch. He dismounted near the barn, led the horse inside and tied it in an empty stall, afterward tramping across the yard to the kitchen door. He had no gun, for Tansey had taken it, but there would be a rifle in the rack in Greg's bedroom that he could use. He found the kitchen door unlocked and walked in, making his way through the dim hallway to the living room which had the dank odor of a closed room in summer time. The silence was eerie. He made his swift check of this end of the house, searching for the bag and the gun, but found neither. He was standing before the stone fireplace, head buried in thought when he caught the clatter of arriving hoofs—one or maybe two horsemen entering the ranch yard.

He slid to the door, listening, and presently hearing voices which drew closer; then boots scraped the gallery boards. A man said, "Mebbe he ain't to home, Kay. If he ain't, we better light a shuck away from here."

It was the voice of Harv Remington Van heard, and now he caught Kay's anxious words: "I wish we'd gone after the sheriff."

The old man argued, "I keep tellin' you Griggs won't do a thing but sit on that big fat rump of his! He's scairt to death o' Bull!"

Van wrapped his fingers around the door knob, flung the door open and stood in the opening, staring into the shocked faces before him.

"Come in," he said.

Breath exploded from Harv Remington and he yelped, "Slim! For God's sake—"

The girl had her hands to her face, startled almost out of her wits. Fear widened the thorough darkness of her eyes, then went away. "What are *you* doing here?" she breathed, at last.

Van managed a smile. "I lied to you," he said quietly. "My name ain't Slim. It's Keeler. I'm Greg Keeler's brother, Van. Come in." He pulled back and nodded them inside, then closed the door and placed his shoulders against the panel, still smiling, still calm, although excitement held his muscles taut. "Horgan's comin' here," he said. "This afternoon."

"We know it," the old man said with brittle urgency. "That's why we came—to warn Greg. We heard Horgan talkin' in the bunkhouse, and—"

"Greg's dead," Van told them grimly. "He was murdered and left up in the Pot Holes."

They both recoiled as from a blow, then Kay blurted out, "It was Horgan—I know it was!"

Van nodded and agreed, "That's why I'm waitin' here for him."

They both noticed the stony change come over his face, his eyes. The old man said, "You can't fight six men alone!"

Van ignored that. "I wish you hadn't come," he said. He studied them with a narrowing of thin lids. "You better leave while there's still time."

Something occurred to him then and he asked, "What's Horgan got on you, Harv? I'd like to know."

The old man colored up and his eyes took on an evasive look, but Kay said quickly, "Tell him! He's got a right to know."

Remington considered a moment, then forced himself to meet Van's penetrating gaze. "There are some things," he stated in a hangdog tone, "a man never ceases to regret." He paused, then blurted out the words: "Keeler, I used to ride with Horgan. It was twenty years ago, back in—well, never mind where. It was bad. Horgan was smugglin' rustled beef across the border, then. Horgan got drunk and talked and they locked him up for fifteen years at Yuma Pen. When he got out he followed me—caught up with me six months after I'd bought Big Hat. You see—"

There came the massed rumble of hoofs in the yard. A voice—Bull Horgan's—boomed out, "Nolly, cover the back! The rest of you scatter a bit! I'm goin' in!"

The three people in the living room stood frozen where they were. Harv Remington's face was gray, the girl's completely blank, while Van's turned still and listeningly alert. Then, suddenly, he whipped himself around. He went to a window in quick, catlike steps and paused there, both hands laying flat along his thighs, his muscular frame bent at the waist. And now his head turned slowly, revealing to the old man and the girl how carefully he watched the yard through a crevice in the shuters. Outside the jangle of bridle rings and saddle gear lifted with the rapid mumble of men's voices.

CHAPTER SIX

Gunsmoke at Rafter K

VAN turned back, facing Harv Remington but looking at Kay. "You'll have to hide," he said. "In there." And he pointed to the right, to the door to Greg's bedroom. To Harv he said, "Give me your gun," and advanced with a hand outstretched.

The old man jumped to obey. His shaky fingers fumbled briefly with his belt buckle; then he stripped the whole thing off and it dropped to the floor and a thud. Van scooped it up and threw it around his waist and buckled it, ducking his head toward the bedroom door. "In there," he snapped. "Hurry!"

Kay mutely did as she was told, though her father appeared to hesitate. But Van's gaze spurred him to obey. The door closed behind them and silence came down on the room, a silence which was immediately broken by the sound of boots pounding on the gallery. Van pivoted to face the outside door; then he slipped the gun from its holster, thumbed the hammer back with an oily click. He held it cocked and pointed at the door, and his mouth looked pinched and his eyes turned tight, and there was no other expression on his face at all but a savage, intent stare.

A voice hollered in the yard, "His horse is in the barn—two others out in back! Watch out!"

Another yelled, "Something wrong here, Bull! Keeler may be layin' fer us in the house!"

"So what?" Bull Horgan's heavy voice went whipping back. "He ain't no more bulletproof than his brother was!"

It was like a blow, the knowledge that Horgan knew the truth, that he, Van, had been exposed and now was standing deprived of even the advantage of surprise while Horgan and his men closed in on him. He was boxed like a coyote in a trap, and old Harv Remington and Kay were trapped with him, with no chance at all of escaping Bull Horgan's malignant wrath.

A cold wind fanned Van's neck in that seemingly interminable period of waiting for the foreman to open the door and show himself. Van had a solitary thought, a fear that he might not even get in one single telling shot before he fell. Hope collapsed in him, but a coolness came, a kind of nerveless courage that made him stand where he was despite

the knowledge that certain death awaited him beyond that weathered door.

He saw the door knob slowly begin to turn. He heard Ed Monday's voice go up outside: "There's been a scad of riders here!" And at the same moment the door swung open, letting in a flood of blinding sunlight to the room. Van took one sudden backward step and raised his gun; and he could faintly see Bull Horgan's stolid, watchful face, his small, red-lidded eyes.

Van murmured, "Walk in, Bull—walk in."

Horgan stiffened visibly. His elbows broke hip-high and he gave a startled grunt; there was the glint of a gun in his right hand. "Walk in slow," Van gently urged, "or I'll drop you where you stand."

Van's finger tightened on the trigger of his outthrust gun. Horgan eased into the room, slowly, cautiously. His head was bent a bit but Van could see the crazy wildness on his sweating, shiny face. There was suddenly a silence in the house, in the yard. Time stood still, then began to move. Van had the feeling that it rushed at him. A voice—not Horgan's but coming from the opening of the hallway behind Van—said, "Keeler, drop that gun!"

The soft command came with blazing suddenness. Van froze and slowly turned his head toward the voice, the gun lowering slowly in his hand. He saw a man in the hallway opening, a thin man with pale, vague eyes and sandy brows, who held a rifle in his hands. It was a brutal face, and one from which all humanness had gone—*the face of Cole Stuart!*

Van drew a breath. "You dirty rat!"

Stuart showed his teeth and grinned. He waggled the barrel of his rifle for emphasis and said, "Just drop that hogleg, Van!"

Van never moved. He wasn't looking at Stuart now, nor at Horgan on his left. He was staring at the bedroom door which had opened as Cole Stuart spoke. Kay Remington came slowly out and advanced into the room with her hands in back of her. With purposeful slowness, she went to Van and turned, standing in front of him while Stuart and Horgan stared in open-mouthed astonishment.

Stuart at last found his voice. "Stand back, Kay, or you'll get hit!"

Bull Horgan snarled, "What the hell are you doin' here?" and came toward her.

Kay saw him and she threw her scornful words at him: "Don't touch me, Bull!"

"Stand back!" Horgan cried. "I'm goin' to kill that sneakin' spy!"

"I won't stand back!" Kay answered defiantly, still standing in front of Van.

From the hallway, Stuart snapped, "Kay, don't be a fool!"

Van looked at Stuart, then at Horgan. He was whip-sawed and knew it.

But now Kay was talking, talking fast. She held her hands behind her as if concealing a weapon, and her eyes were bright and utterly scathing and there was nothing about her that looked like fear.

"If you touch him, I'll kill you both!" She couldn't have appeared braver or more assured if she had actually held a gun. She was staring at Stuart now. "And you, Cole—Van said you were a friend of ours—that we could trust you! What kind of a man are you?"

Stuart, uncertain of what to do, now turned surly. "I work for Horgan—not for you?"

HORGAN yelled, "That's enough of this!" and made a grab for Kay. When he did that he was only a yard or two away from her, but Kay saw his intent and exploded into catlike movement. She sprang at him and clawed both hands across his florid, perspiring face, raking him over the eyes, blinding him.

Horgan howled as though he had been seared by flame, and now he cringed back, gun in hand, and clapped his left forearm to his eyes. Kay rushed at him, clawing at his face.

Then a gun went off thunderously in the room; its crashing echo beat painfully against Van's ears. He had been watching Horgan and the girl, ignoring the threat of Stuart's rifle, but now he raised his gun and turned on him. He was just in time to see the stringy puncher stagger back a pace and stop. A puff of smoke rolled across the room, and it came from the bedroom door which, as Van stared, was filled by the crouching shape of Harv Remington, who held a smoking rifle in his hand.

Van whipped his gaze to Stuart, saw the puncher slowly wilt. He saw Stuart's lips pull back crazily, then saw him bow his head and bend his knees as if to kneel. Half kneeling, then, he toppled with his weapon to the floor.

Van faced around toward Horgan who was still vainly fighting off the girl near the door. He was swinging his arms at her, cursing frantically, unable to cope with her at all. He had his back to the open door when Kay was thrown to her knees. His gun went up and he threw down on Van.

Van had just time enough to fire. *Here it comes!* was in his mind as his trigger finger squeezed. A jet of flame leaped at Horgan from the muzzle of Van's gun; and Van knew the shot was good, because Horgan vanished through the open door as if jerked from outside by a rope around his neck.

The echo of Van's shot pounded loudly through the house. And suddenly, in the yard, was the sound of shooting and yelling. He made the gallery in three long-reaching strides. Pandemonium reigned over the scene he viewed. Men were running, and dust and gunsmoke boiled up. Tansey and Wilkins and their crews had returned.

Van knew suddenly that the ranchmen had gone for other help, because the pressure of the riders got greater in the front yard. The Big Hat men were forted up in the barn, a hundred yards away, and the ranchmen kept circling and firing into it through window and door. Bullets clipped the trees near at hand as Van dropped to the dust and moved into the yard he heard them sing and chatter.

He saw the high shapes of the riders weave back and forth, and he heard Tansey's Rebel yell as he drove his men to charge the barn.

Van reached a point midway in the yard and squatted in the dust with the bullets weaving a criss-cross pattern above his head. He saw the thin shape of Chappie Ford break out of the barn and start for the grade and the timber above. He fired at Ford and saw the puncher trip and stagger and then fall flat; he saw the confusion and dust and the spurting of powder smoke, and he heard the ranchmen shout and fire their guns as they closed in on the barn where the Big Hat survivors were now hemmed in.

Then all the firing stopped. The smell of gunsmoke lingered in the yard long after the guns had quit and long after John Tansey and three of his crew had vanished up the trail in pursuit of Nolly Pine, who had escaped the fate of his companions. Dud Wilkins ranged around the front yard and saw Van and bore down on him. All the others had dismounted, and some of the riders fell in at Wilkins' heels. They came up to Van who was waiting silently, and Wilkins stared at him and said, "Who's that lyin' on the porch?"

VAN could understand the silence and the weariness which suddenly seemed to come over the group confronting him. He said: "Go up on the porch and see."

Wilkins started toward the house, but halted suddenly, as Harv Remington and Kay came out on the gallery. The ranchman stared back at Van and said, "What's this?"

Van waved him on. "We'll talk afterward."

Wilkins continued on and climbed to the gallery. He ignored the old man and the girl, and bent over the lunkish shape that was Bull Horgan. He straightened up and looked around. "It's Horgan, and he's dead!"

They all stared at Van Keeler, then; and presently Wilkins came back and extended a calloused hand and said, "A lucky break for us, Keeler. We can damn' close to hangin' an innocent man a while ago!"

Van returned the ranchman's steady grip. "You're tellin' *me?*" he said, and grinned.

Dud Wilkins showed Van a streaky smile, and his eyes thawed out. "There's one mistake you made," he said. "You should've told me who you was the other night. Been better."

Van shrugged. "How'd I know it wasn't your outfit that killed my brother Greg?"

Wilkins' eyes turned sharp and questioning. "You've found Greg, then?"

"Up in the Pot Holes," Van said tersely. "Drug him there after they killed him."

Wilkins seemed relieved. He indicated Harv and Kay on the gallery, but Van anticipated his question and cut in, "Harv's on the square. Horgan ran the whole shebang and Hary was scared he might hurt the girl."

"That's good enough for me," Dud Wilkins said. "It'll have to be for Tansey, too."

There was a lengthy silence then—a silence that pulsed around Van like the beat of his own heart. He waited for the ranchman's next words, and when they finally came, he smiled. Dud Wilkins said, "Well, you will be taking over here so we'll clear out and leave you on your own. There anything we c'n do?"

"There is," Van said. "You'll find some shovels in the barn. Before you ride, you can bury the dead for me."

Later that afternoon, Van faced the old man and the girl in the cleaned-up living room at Rafter K, and said, "It was lucky you and Kay were here when Cole Stuart died. Otherwise I'd never known he killed Greg."

Harv thoughtfully puffed his black cigar while Kay looked on from her chair nearby. "He was a stinker," the old man said. "He made it look like he hated Horgan and all the time he was watchin' you—and us." He peered at Van from under his bushy brows. "Did you find the warbag and your brother's gun?"

Van nodded, rolling a cigarette. "In the hay out at the barn where Stuart hid it yesterday. What I can understand is why he didn't shoot me in the back like he done to Greg. Why, hell, he knew I was Van Keeler the minute he found my bag!"

"Well, he didn't," the old man sighed. "Mebbe he wanted to watch you squirm."

Van threw his cigarette in the fireplace unsmoked. "Well, thanks to you and Kay—"

"No thanks to us," Harv said with spirit. The vagueness of his eyes had disappeared.

"There are some things," the old man said in a livelier tone than Van had ever heard him use, " a man cannot repay. But if there's anything I have you need—"

Van glanced at Kay and found her smiling steadily into his eyes. He grinned, and said, "Maybe there is, but it can wait a little while, I guess. Later on I'll let you know."

The girl stood up suddenly and came toward the open door. He took her hand. He closed his fingers around it and felt it tremble; then the pressure of his fingers was returned.

"Later," she murmured, for his ears alone. "But please don't make it too long!"

THE END

WHEN PARDNERS

By Walt Coburn

Every gun in the house seemed to shoot at the same second.

Only when it was too late, did Big Chet realize just how much he needed his bantam pardner, Smoky Moore. . . . For Chet was holding deuces in a win-or-die game against five tinhorn professionals who'd cut a throat as slick as they'd cut a cold deck!

PACK GUNS!

One Played to Win — One Won to Die!

CHAPTER ONE

Tying Into Trouble

SOMETIMES the cow country is given to making broad statements. It claimed that Chet Gearing and Smoky Moore were the best pair of team ropers and team tyers of all time. That takes in too much big territory and discards the fast records of too many top-hand ropers. . . . But that these two were among the very best, no man could or would ever dispute.

Unlike many professional rodeo contestants, Chet Gearing and Smoky Moore were as good out on the range as they were in front of a crowded grandstand. They were fast, hard working cowhands with plenty of savvy. Ranch-born, range-raised, forty-a-month cowhands, they hoped to win enough money rodeoing to buy their own outfit and register their own brand. And for a while, unless you knew all the facts, it looked like Chet Gearing and Smoky Moore had team-roped and tied their cowpuncher world. . . .

But those who actually knew Chet Gearing and Smoky Moore either shook their heads or said nothing at all. Sitting back, as the cow country will, to let any man or pair of men work out their own destinies according to their lights.

Some who spoke out of turn made evil predictions. Whiskey talk said that some day Chet Gearing and Smoky Moore would lock horns in a six-shooter settlement—the final tally of a long, long score of little picayune things. Because, deep buried in the hearts of Chet Gearing and Smoky Moore, was a hatred. That hatred had been planted like a bad seed, many years ago. The seed had rotted, rather than ripened, and their cowpuncher hearts had pumped the blood of its slow poison through their veins. So now the gossips put in their two-bits worth.

Chet Gearing was a big man. Big-boned, hard-muscled, tough as a boot. He had sandy reddish hair and eyebrows that made a crooked line that tufted above the high bridge of a large, hawk-beaked nose. His eyes were gray-green, and he had the kind of skin that roughens and peels in the hot sun and raw wind; and because daily shaving was something of an ordeal, Chet would let his red whiskers grow for a week at a time while he and his pardner traveled the long jumps in a stock car from one big rodeo to the next.

But every night of the show found Chet barbered and bathed and dressed like a range dude in fancy shirt and shopmade fancy boots into which he tucked the legs of his tight fitting tailored pants. He cut a handsome, swaggering figure around hotel lobbies and dance floors, and when he rode out in answer to the megaphoned call of the rodeo announcer to take his bow he was something to flutter the feminine hearts in the grandstand. And no man was more aware of the dashing figure he cut than world champion team roper Chet Gearing. Drunk, incidentally, Chet was apt to brag about it in a loud hoorawing voice. . . .

Smoky Moore had an ingrown bashfulness that was a torture to him a lot of the time. Short-statured, he stood no higher than five feet seven in his high-heeled boots. Husky around the shoulders and chest, he had a lean hard belly and a pair of bowed, saddle-muscled legs. And afoot or on horseback he was quick as the proverbial cat, with a natural split-second coordination of brain and muscle that goes into the make-up of any trained athlete.

Smoky Moore had wiry black hair and heavy black brows. His eyes were a deep, smoky gray that looked black in shadow. Blunt jawed, short-nosed, he had a long upper lip and a wide, square-cornered mouth that grinned easily. It was a slow grin that crinkled the corners of his eyes. His skin was weathered to a deep, ingrained tan. Inarticulate among strangers, quiet of speech and soft-spoken even among his own kind, strangers mistook his silence for sulleness. Girls out for a good time were apt to discard Smoky Moore as a dull and boresome companion for an evening's fun.

Chet never had to worry about their roping horses because he could gamble on Smoky looking after them. Smoky Moore loved a horse, and one sure way to get a fight out of Smoky Moore was to abuse one.

Chet Gearing was a free and noisy spender around the saloons and honkeytonks. But it was Smoky Moore that a man came to in a tight when he was broke and needed a loan. And most of those loans were never repaid. But that never seemed to dent Smoky's faith in a man with a hardluck story.

"Them rodeo panhandlers keep Smoky bled white," big Chet Gearing always complained. "Mebbyso the runt's scared to turn 'em down."

Smoky Moore never let on that he hated to be called "the runt," or even Shorty. But he'd gotten used to it. A man had to take his share of hoorawing. If you stood five six in your sock feet, they called you Shorty. But mostly he was called Smoky. And it was only his big, loud-mouthed team roping pardner Chet who was forever calling him Runt or Shorty or Sawed-Off. . . .

Little enough in itself, that was one of the many, many things that big Chet Gearing did to belittle and annoy his pardner. And it had begun many years ago when they were bald-faced kids working for the same cow outfits.

If Chet Gearing's bullying of little Smoky Moore had any actual beginning place, it might be marked to the time when they first met. And it could be accounted for by jealousy.

YOUNG CHET GEARING was riding the rough string for the Circle C outfit in Montana that fall on the beef round-up. He had to hobble his stirrups to ride a big bronc called Bogus Brown. . . . And there was a leggy, slim-bellied gray bronc called Lizard that had thrown Chet so many times the big tough young bronc-twister had outlawed the Lizard.

Smoky Moore was a kid then, about Chet's age—nineteen or twenty. The wagon boss, at Chet Gearing's suggestion, put the Bogus Brown and Lizard in the Smoky kid's string of horses. Giving a new hand a bronc to ride was all a part of the initiation of a new cowhand. And the little black-haired Smoky kid knew it, and he abided by it as best he knew.

The big Bogus Brown threw Smoky Moore three times hand-running before the kid got the hang of it. Then Smoky rode the horse.

Lizard's tricky pitching, for some reason, came easier. Little Smoky Moore caught onto the Lizard's sunfishing and end-swapping without much trouble. Where the Lizard could pitch and twist out from under the lanky Chet, little Smoky rode him a lot easier than he'd ridden the big, hard bucking Bogus. It was the cleanest, prettiest ride any bronc-peeler had ever made on the gray Lizard. Not only that, but within a week Smoky Moore was roping calves off Lizard.

The Circle C wagon boss had perhaps felt a little ashamed of himself, and he made a big gesture by way of atonement.

"Chet Gearing outlawed the Lizard," he told Smoky, "so he's yourn if you want a private horse."

Lizard was the first private horse young Smoky Moore ever owned and he made a rope horse out of the animal—one of the best rope horses ever seen in action anywhere.

Chet Gearing laughed off his humiliation in his own way. He bragged loudly and openly, with Smoky Moore listening and saying nothing by way of denial, that he, Chet, had ridden and could ride broncs that Smoky Moore wouldn't go into the same corral with.

But Smoky had made top cow horses out of the Bogus Brown and the Lizard outlaw. And before the third beef shipment the wagon boss had taken the rough string away from the tall, big-boned Chet and given the string of broncs to little Smoky Moore to gentle.

"Because," said the Circle C wagon boss, "I want them green broncs gentled for cow horses, not buckin' stock, to be contested on. . . . That Smoky's the best hand with a green bronc I ever watched work."

So perhaps that's when and where Chet Gearing began hating Smoky Moore although he never let on. And when he found out Smoky was a natural roper, he talked Smoky Moore into quitting the Circle C to make big money contesting at the big rodeos. . . . And so they headed south for the winter.

That marked the beginning of their team roping pardnership. And in a dozen years time they built up their enviable reputation, salting down more money than Smoky Moore had ever dreamed of having in his bank account. It was typical of Smoky Moore that he never bet on their team tying. And it was nearly a year before he found out that Chet had been gambling heavily on their work.

Chet had acted as banker. It was always big Chet Gearing who collected their winnings at the rodeo pay-off window, and he carried them in his pocket, peeling off ten or twenty to Smoky to eat on or pay the feed bills at the barn. Then with the rest, he'd buy drinks for the house or sit into an all-night poker game or crap game with their bankroll. Chet Gearing was a born gambler. It was in his blood. And he won far more often than he lost.

It was easy enough to find a gambling game in the hotel rooms or around the rodeo stables or on the train between towns. Smoky bedded down with their rope horses at the barn or in the horse car on the train, while Chet sat into an all-night poker game.

They both made good money in the bronc riding events the first few years, with Smoky winning most of it because he was by far the better bronc rider. Then Chet put a sudden halt to their bronc riding.

"There's no av'rage in bronc ridin', Runt," he'd said. "A man'll only git crippled, then the doc and the hospital take our dough. We'll leave them broncs to the boneheads and me'n you will clean up with our ketch ropes—mebbeso dab our loops on enough of the long green to buy us a real cow outfit somewheres. Nope, no more bronc stompin' fer us, Shorty."

Chet had a way of making his talk sound convincing and Smoky never realized it was jealousy that prompted Chet Gearing to blacklist the bronc riding. That was the year that Smoky Moore was given the title of World Champion Bronc Rider. . . .

Smoky Moore was the only man who did not know what prompted Chet Gearing to ban their bronc riding. Smoky swallowed Chet's argument—hook, sinker and most of the line. . . . But he edged in a word at the end.

"Ain't it about time we actually banked our dough, Chet?" he asked. "I mean, if we're goin' to pool it in a spread of our own, we'd orter put it in a savin' account where neither of us kin touch a dollar of it."

"Now who in the hell has bin borin' their auger into you, Runt?" Chet's sunburnt face had reddened to a dark brick color, and he'd sounded suddenly angry.

"Nobody, Chet." Smoky had stood his ground. "The idee come right outa my own bonehead. But if you don't cotton to the notion, say so and forget it. Just gimme my half of what we got and I'll bank mine and you pack yours in that flash-roll in your jeans. Mebbyso I'm just an ol' rainy day country boy. . . ."

"Most mebby," Chet turned it into one of his hoorawing taunts that had the cutting edge of a dull razor, "Most mebby, Runt, it's some gal got you on her lead rope."

Smoky Moore's square, tanned face flushed darkly and his smoky eyes slid away from the hard-eyed glance of his roping pardner.

CHET GEARING had a loud sounding laugh. Mostly the things Chet found worth laughing at were his own practical jokes that caused somebody discomfort or embarrassment or actual pain. Chet could turn on that big laugh and then turn it off at will. Men heard it and looked around to see who had been hurt. . . .

"Keep your shirt tail tucked in, Runt," Chet turned off his hoorawing laugh. "You better stick to them rope ponies and leave the girlin' to a man that savvies how to love 'em an' leave 'em. . . . Anyhow, you can't stand flat-footed with your boots on an' kiss her on them ruby lips. . . . Shirley Curtis's sorrel head tops yourn when you dance. Hell, she's just feelin' sorry for you when you stand around like a mammyless calf at a round-up. You think she's stuck on you, but brother, that red-head plays the field."

They were in their hotel room at Cheyenne. . . . Chet standing there, grinning.

Smoky had to jump to hit the big, sandy-haired Chet. But he had all his hundred and fifty five pounds of quick, tough, hard muscle behind it.

Big Chet Gearing staggered backwards, off balance. He'd been caught off guard. It was the first time he'd ever prodded a fight out of Smoky and he was the most surprised man in Cheyenne that night when he went down. That hard fist had caught him on the point and rocked his head back and to one side and dizzy pain shot up through his skull and he went over backwards with Smoky Moore on top. A white-lipped Smoky, the blood drained from his tough, square-jawed face.

Smoky Moore had big Chet Gearing choked half to death when the noise of the ruckus in their room attracted attention and some of the cowboy contestants shoved open the door and came in on it. They had a time dragging Smoky off, getting his muscular, short-fingered hands loosened from their death grip. Chet's face was purple and his tongue was hanging out.

Smoky came out of his killer's cold fury only when they threw water in his white face. They filled the bathtub and held Smoky down in the cold water till he cooled off and regained his senses. It was perhaps half an hour later when they got Chet Gearing back to consciousness.

"Only that there's a law agin' it, Smoky," said one of them, "we'd a bin tickled to stand by and watch you git the job done. Don't hold it agin' us too hard, feller. . . ."

Smoky got out of his sodden dripping clothes and into dry duds. They wanted him to go on downstairs to the saloon or the dance. But he shook his head, and he was standing there beside the bed when big Chet Gearing came out of it. He fed Chet watered whiskey and Chet sat up after a while and grinned mirthlessly at Smoky and the half-dozen cowboy contestants who overrode Smoky's protests and stayed. Chet took the bottle of whiskey from Smoky's hand and drank like a thirsty man.

"Me'n my pardner Smoky," Chet's voice had a croaking sound, "got to rasslin'. . . . No hard feelin's, pardner?"

"Not here, Chet. We kin drop it, if that's how you want it."

"That's how we both gotta want it, Runt. . . . Now git out of here, you two-bit sons, and don't come back."

Smoky Moore nodded. "I'm much obliged, boys."

They went out a little reluctantly. When Smoky had closed the door he opened their two warsacks and got out Chet's six-shooter and his own. He tossed Chet's gun over on the bed where Chet sat now, watching him narrowly.

"We better settle this now, Chet. Once and for all. . . ."

But Chet Gearing had no stomach for that kind a showdown—not now. The sign wasn't right. There was a cunning glint in his green eyes as he shook his head. He forced a grin.

"Don't be a damned fool, Sawed-Off. Hell, I was only hoorawin'. You know Chet Gearing and his big mouth. . . . I hadn't no idee you was playin' for keeps. Mebbyso I was kinda ringy thinkin' how anybody might bust me'n you up thataway. We got this team ropin' down to where she's the big jackpot, an' together we kin clean up the big dough. . . . Split us up and neither of us would make enough money to feed our rope ponies."

He paused, went on: "Now what we was talkin' about was bankin' our winnin's. That's solid thinkin', pardner, and from here on we bank it. Only lemme hold out a part of mine. . . . These rodeo hands is suckers. Somebody's goin' to trim 'em an' it might as well be big Chet Gearing. And about the other. If you're playin' for keeps, more luck to you, Runt. I'd like to be best man at your weddin'—and here's my hand on it."

Chet Gearing could put a lot into it when he took the trouble. He could make it sound frank and open and sincere. Another man might not have been taken in so easily. But the hot fever of anger had died out in Smoky and he felt empty and sick inside. For a long time now he had taken Chet's hoorawing with a little salt and habit was strong within him.

Also, his was the kind of hot-headed Irish temper that flares into a quick blaze and cools almost as suddenly. Besides, there was a lot of horse sense behind Chet's argument. They were a perfectly matched roping team. Each knew the other's every motion and they worked together like a well-oiled machine. It would take months, years, perhaps, to break in with a new team roper pardner. . . . And this was their living. They were the champions.

SMOKY put the two six-shooters back in their old canvas warsacks they had carried on the round-up and back and forth across the country. Then he took a drink with Chet. But he did not shake hands. Nor did he mention Shirley Curtis. And Chet Gearing had sense enough, for once, to keep his big mouth shut.

Now and then while Smoky Moore, stripped to the waist, lathered and shaved, he would catch Chet Gearing watching him narrowly. It was the first time big Chet had ever actually prodded little Smoky Moore into a fight, and the big cowpuncher was still somewhat bewildered by the boomerang result. Chet Gearing was big and tough and hard to whip. Smoky, outweighed by about fifty pounds, had given him a working over so swiftly and decisively that it had been a one-sided ruckus from which

the smaller man had emerged with no more than a torn shirt to show for it. And it took a hell of a good man to whip Chet Gearing.

Big Chet was mighty hard to handle and he seldom lost a battle. And here, alone in their hotel room, without help, the runt had cleaned his plow before he'd even worked up a sweat. And the humiliation of it hurt far deeper and with a more lasting pain than the bruises on his red neck or the lumpy swelling on the point of his jaw. There was a look in Chet's bloodshot green eyes that was ugly and crafty. Smoky caught it in the shaving mirror and read it for what it was worth.

Chet had bragged many a time that no man had ever whipped him so that he stayed whipped. Sooner or later, when the sign was right, big Chet Gearing would get the man who had whipped him. He'd wait until the man was too drunk to put up a fight, maybe, or catch him off balance with his guard down. And then he'd tie into that man. And when Chet Gearing beat a man up, he did a first-class job of it. If he couldn't whip him with his big fists he whipped him with his gun barrel. And when he knocked a man down, he licked and tromped him. Smoky knew the look in Chet's green eyes, but it didn't spook him.

Smoky Moore didn't spook that easy. He knew what he was up against. He went on calmly shaving, with Chet massaging his bruised neck and swollen jaw as he sat on the edge of the bed nibbling at the bottle of whiskey. From here on Smoky Moore would have to watch his roping pardner mighty careful.

Smoky finished shaving, washed the dabs of dried lather from his face, and put on the newest shirt he owned. He was taking Shirley Curtis to the big rodeo dance in the hotel ballroom. . . . Or maybe it was the other way around—maybe Shirley was taking him.

"I'm weary of watching you stand around," Shirley had told Smoky out at the rodeo grounds that day, "like a young bull that's been whipped outa the herd. Put on your Sunday shirt, Smoky. I'm taking you to the dance tonight."

When somebody rapped on the door Smoky figured it was Shirley. It would be just like her to reverse the procedure and call for him. But when the door was shoved open it was Shirley's father, Buckskin Curtis.

Chet grinned flatly. "Come in, Buck. And shut the door. You got 'em?"

Buckskin Curtis took three sealed decks of playing cards from his pocket and tossed them on the bed beside Chet Gearing, cutting a quick look in Smoky's direction.

Buckskin Curtis was a tall, well built, handsome man, with no more than a faint sprinkling of gray around the thick coarse black hair that bushed his temples. He carried himself erect as a soldier on parade. And he wore his fringed, beaded buckskins with a swagger. A showman, Buckskin Curtis had toured Europe with the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show, billed as the World's Champion trick rider and roper. His eyes were opaque black and his coarse black hair, dark, almost swarthy skin and the bold cut of his nose and jaw gave him the appearance of having Indian blood. The buckskins he wore accentuated it.

Buckskin Curtis prided himself on his straight-backed youthful appearance and it pleased him to be mistaken for Shirley's brother or husband. He billed their trick riding and roping act as Buckskin and Shirley Curtis. He wore buckskin gloves to protect his hands. They were well kept, supple hands—the hands of a gambling man. Buckskin Curtis made ten times the money gambling than he did out in the rodeo arena. . . .

Bad losers claimed that Buck Curtis was a crooked dealer, that his cards were marked and his dice loaded. But nobody had been clever enough to prove it until Chet Gearing had caught him one night when Chet wasn't nearly as drunk as he'd let on to be and had let Buck Curtis take him for a thousand dollars. Then Chet had sobered up too quickly. He had taken Buckskin Curtis' own deck of marked cards and when only the two of them were in the room big Chet had shuffled and riffled and dealt a few hands face down and read the cards aloud without turning them face up. Buck Curtis had handed Chet back the thousand dollars. And from then on they had worked in cahoots.

"Shirley's dressed, Smoky," said Buckskin Curtis. "Keep her waitin' more'n five minutes and she'll leave you holdin' the sack. . . ."

Smoky Moore took the hint and left the room.

CHAPTER TWO

Hackamore-Broke!

SMOKY MOORE no longer fought every man who called him Shorty. He had gotten beyond that, years ago. But he was still sensitive about his short stature and he had his boot heels built up an inch to give him a little more height. When they waltzed, his eyes were on a level with Shirley Curtis' black-fringed black eyes. The top of her sleek, dark red hair was on a level with his wiry black head and her high heels were the same height as his built-up bootheels.

Shirley Curtis was slim, trimly made, her muscles as hard as a man's. She was something to take a man's breath when she did her trick riding, and she was easy to look at on the dance floor with her glossy red hair, her

heavily fringed black eyes, her rather wide, red-lipped mouth.

Shirley Curtis had been born in the performer's dressing tent while the "Bill Show" was on tour in Europe. Her mother had come from a long line of circus performers; a bareback rider. Reared among circus people, Shirley had ridden a horse since she was a child. The sawdust ring under the big top had been her playground, and cowboys with the Bill Show had teased her and spoiled her and taught her how to trick ride and trick rope.

Somehow, she had acquired an education. Her mother had been killed by a horse she was training for their trick riding act, when Shirley was fifteen, and the young girl had taken her mother's place in the trick riding at that night's show. She had ridden the same horse that had killed her mother. And for the first time she had performed that difficult and dangerous trick of going down and in under the belly of the running horse to come up on the other side. Then she'd ridden back the length of the packed bleachers, standing on the saddle while the horse raced to the far end, a smile frozen on her face. . . . A trouper, they called Shirley Curtis that night, and that was the greatest tribute Buffalo Bill and his Wild West Show could pay any performer.

Shirley Curtis had finished the training of the pinto horse that had killed her mother without the slightest outward sign of fear. It had not been the fault of the horse, she said simply. Her mother had made a mistake in split-second timing. It takes perfect timing for that dangerous work—cold nerve and perfect coordination of mind and muscle. And that afternoon Shirley's mother had not been herself; her mind had been on something else. Something had upset Shirley Curtis's mother, billed as Belle Curtis, so that her nerves were jangled, unsteady. Her eyes had been red rimmed from too much crying that morning, and she had eaten no noon meal. And Shirley had smelled whiskey on her mother's breath in the dressing tent. . . .

"We're quitting the Bill Show, Baby," her mother had told Shirley when they were dressing for their act, "Tomorrow. . . . You and I. We're quitting the Bill Show, and we're quitting Buckskin Curtis. Fifteen, sixteen years is that much too long to stay married to a blackleg crook, a thief and a scoundrel. I'll tell you the story after the show, Baby—unless you already know it. . . ."

After her mother's funeral, Shirley had slid away from her father's protective arm, her dark eyes shadowed, her voice low-pitched.

"The Checkers Paint," she told Buckskin Curtis, "is a good horse—there's not a mean hair on his black and white hide. . . . The Checkers Paint is mine now. I'll ride him."

"You rode 'im last night, youngster. While I stood there sweatin' and shiverin' like I had chills an' fever. That damned paint horse killed Belle."

"*You* killed Belle." Shirley hadn't lifted her low-toned voice. "You killed my mother. You stole her money and gambled it away—the money she'd saved to buy a little horse ranch; my school money. . . . You robbed the little strongbox in her trunk. Colonel Bill had warned you yesterday morning that you were through—that the Bill Show was the biggest on earth but not big enough to hold a tinhorn card sharp. . . . I'll keep the Checkerboard Paint. He's clean-hearted. But don't you ever touch me again, you murderer!"

But Shirley Curtis hadn't quit her father. She'd thanked the great Colonel Bill Cody when he wanted to bill her alone with his Wild West Show. And she'd nursed Buckskin Curtis through the nightmare torture of drunken horrors when he'd wanted to kill himself so that he could be with Belle. . . . And when Shirley had her father nursed back to health and sanity she put him back to work and worked with him. But her daughter's love was something that lay buried with her mother Belle in the little cemetery at the edge of old Tucson, in Arizona. . . .

But that was something that Shirley Curtis kept a secret. She called her father Buck and treated him with a sort of careless comradeship. And save for the rumors that had died a slow death during the past few years since her mother's death, nobody guessed that theirs was hardly more than a working pardnership. Shirley Curtis collected and kept her share of their earnings and paid her own bills. And she was saving enough money to buy the little horse ranch Belle Curtis had wanted, down there in the shadow of the Tucson Mountains. . . .

Tonight, at Cheyenne, Shirley Curtis claimed every dance with Smoky Moore. There was something almost primitive and savage in her claim. Her eyes were too bright, like shining black agate, and her laughter too brittle. And her slim, tanned hand was cold in his.

SMOKY MOORE savvied horses. But he was too girl-shy to know anything at all about women, Shirley Curtis least of all. And that, despite the fact that she was the only girl he had ever met who did not make him feel uncomfortable. Smoky was deeply in love with Shirley, but he was too bashful and shy to speak to her about it. And he was too ignorant in the ways of the so-called weaker sex to suspect that Shirley knew how he felt towards her. . . . He was, however, aware of the fact that something was troubling her tonight, and he wanted to help her, any way he could. But he was afraid to open his mouth.

He kept thinking of Chet Gearing up there

in the hotel room, and Buckskin Curtis coming in with the three decks of cards. There was a high stake poker game opening tonight. The news had gone around out at the rodeo grounds, and word had been passed that the cowboy contestants with their cheap two-bit rolls were barred. This was going to be a sky-the-limit game, and the door would be locked. . . .

It was past midnight. Smoky's feet hurt from so much dancing, but he was too game, as well as too bashful, to say anything about sitting down. Smoky was a good dancer, and he and Shirley danced well together. Even tonight, when he had the feeling that the girl in his arms was a million miles away from him in her thoughts. . . . And then she turned her head and her lips brushed his and he heard a small tight sob choke her throat.

"I read a story once," her voice was tense, barely audible as her lips brushed his ear, "about a man that woke up with his throat cut from ear to ear. . . . Then when he jumped up and looked at himself in the mirror he saw that it wasn't cut; it had been a bad dream. Did you ever wake up with your throat cut, Smoky?"

Smoky lost step, then caught it. His grin was uncertain. His face felt hot and sweaty because her lips were so close to his ear that her breath tickled him. . . .

"Yeah. . . . Now you mention it, I reckon I have. Leastways, I know what you mean." He was thinking of his pardner Chet Gearing. Chet had been cutting Smoky's throat for a long time. . . .

"Only this time," said Shirley Curtis, "it's not another nightmare. It's the real McCoy." Then she took hold of his arm and shook him, roughly, throwing him so completely off stride he quit dancing.

"You darned Smoky. . . . Old-Man-Afraid-of-His-Horses. . . . Oh, darn you, you . . . you *Smoky!*" A sob caught in her voice. "Let's—let's get out of here."

She almost dragged him through the packed crowd of dancers, and some of the cowboy contestants threw joshes at them as they shouldered past: Rough, almost coarse jokes, but understood and taken accordingly.

"Shirley's got pore Smoky on a lead rope. . . ."

"He's hackamore broke, Shirley! Don't yank on the pore feller with a spade bit."

"Don't beller when she burns that Shirley S on your Smoky hide, feller!"

Outside, Shirley had a buckboard waiting to take them out to the rodeo grounds, where their horses were stabled. And all the way out she clung tightly to Smoky's hand, her grip as tight and cold as the jaws of a steel trap.

Once at the ground, they saddled their horses and rode out of town for a mile or so. Then Shirley Curtis broke the silence between them, her voice low, vibrant.

"You've loved me for a long time, haven't you, Smoky?"

"Since almost the first time I ever laid eyes on you, I reckon." He was losing something of his shyness as she held his hand and their stirrups touched.

"I should have dragged that out of you long ago; I've always known it. But I could have gotten it out of you before now, so I can't cuss you out for holding back. . . . And now it's too late. It's one of those things you build up and it gets high and higher and then it collapses. I liked to watch you, liked to make you suffer. I'm cruel as a cat—women are like that. You'd never know it, Smoky, but a man like Chet Gearing would. There ain't many of the answers that big spur-jingler don't know. . . . Why didn't you kill him a few hours ago?" Her voice was tense, savage.

"The boys drug me off. . . ."

"There I go blaming you again. . . . I heard the ruckus and opened the door and looked in. Then I got panicky and called some of the boys. I should have shut the door and gone on to my room and stayed there. But I was scared. I was afraid, Smoky. The law hangs a man for killing another man—even when it's a polecat like big Chet Gearing. . . . Now I'm feeling sorry for Shirley Curtis and I'm taking it out on the only man I ever loved and trusted all the way. . . . I'll quit talking around in circles and get down to cases. Let's step down."

Shirley was riding the Checkboard Paint and Smoky was on Lizard. Both horses were a little past their prime now, and ready for pensioning. But they were taken along because Shirley and Smoky loved horses and they rode these two only in parades and for light work.

Shirley stood close to Smoky in the starlight and his arms went around her almost timidly and then her lips bruised against his hard-lipped mouth. She kicked off one boot and then the other and told him to take his boots off. Then they stood in their sock feet and Smoky's mouth was on a level with Shirley's eyes. And she was laughing softly.

"He lied to you, Smoky. You're at least an inch and a half taller. Chet Gearing lied when he told you you couldn't stand flat-footed and kiss me. . . . I was outside the door when the argument started—I'd stopped to tell you not to rabbit on me for the dance date. And I wish now I'd let you kill Chet Gearing. I'd go through the hot-hinged gates of hell with you, Smoky. . . . And if our luck runs out, that may be it. . . . If their cheating, marked-deck luck backfires tonight, anything may happen to Chet Gearing and to Buckskin Curtis

—and to you and me. . . . Kiss me! Then we'll sit down on the ground and I'll tally it up for you."

CHAPTER THREE

"Hey, Rube!"

IT TOOK but a little telling. Buckskin Curtis had gotten hold of Shirley's bank book—forged her name to a check that drew out every dollar she had in the world. He had it in cash tonight, even as Chet had all the money he and Smoky had saved up. Buckskin Curtis and Chet Gearing had pooled their bankrolls, and it added up to somewhere in five big figures—seventy-five or eighty thousand dollars. They were sitting in a high-stake poker game with it now, with some high-stake gamblers. And before that game ended, if Buck Curtis and Chet Gearing found their luck slipping away, they would use the three sealed decks of marked cards.

"Buckskin broke the news to me at the supper table," said Shirley. "He said he had my money, but that he'd build it up mountain-high and pay me back double what he took out of my bank. It would be enough to buy that little horse ranch my mother wanted. . . . Or I could call in the law right now and take back my money and send my own father to the pen. . . ."

Smoky had his arm around her shoulders. His laugh was almost a deep, hearty chuckle.

"Let 'em go bust, Shirley. There's worse things than bein' broke. For us, I mean. We'll git married as soon as I can locate a parson and git him outa his blankets. . . . Big outfits hate to hire a rodeo contestant, but I kin talk 'em into givin' me a job. Or we'll travel the rodeo circuit. I'll ride broncs and rope—you trick ride and spin fancy loops. It'd be better, anyhow, if we started from scratch."

"You're figuring," said Shirley, "without Chet Gearing and his card sharping pardner, Buckskin Curtis. Chet has enough on my father to send him to the pen. Chet Gearing talks a lot and says nothing. But now and then he lays it on the line. And when he does, he's playing for keeps. . . . When Buck Curtis gave him the nod, Chet came over to the supper table. And your team tying pardner laid it on the line."

She paused, choking back a little sob. "I'm not of age; Buckskin Curtis is my legal guardian. And that parson you spoke of. . . . Well, Chet Gearing had him waiting in the parlor, and Buckskin Curtis gave his daughter Shirley in legal marriage to Chet Gearing at seven-thirty last evening. Amen. . . . I am now the legal wife of Chester Gearing. . . . I said legal wife—no more. And never will I be anything but what I am now. That big ox knew better than to try to kiss his bride. . . ."

"But why . . . ?"

"There's a law," explained Shirley, "that says a wife cannot testify on the witness stand in court against her husband. . . ."

"But I still don't savvy."

"It was Chet Gearing, not Buckskin Curtis, who forged my signature to the check. They—they told me that *after* the wedding ceremony."

Smoky started to get to his feet, his dark, smoky eyes gleaming.

"Your gun's in your warsack. . . . That reading your mind, Smoky?"

"That calls the turn, Shirley."

"It won't do. That'll really bog us down. I'd be the Widder Gearing—but you'd be in the pen. No, we'll play the marked cards they dealt us, Smoky—play 'em like we held aces. . . . And I'm not scared now. I'm not afraid now of anything or anyone on earth. Let's pull on our boots. . . ."

Smoky held her and kissed her and his awkward shyness was gone, now. Shirley laughed shakily and mussed his wiry black hair. Talking it out of her system, Shirley said, had slipped the bothersome pack from her shoulders. She took his tobacco and papers and rolled a cigarette and lit it for him and they talked while their horses grazed, bridle reins trailing.

There was no telling how long that big poker game would last, or whether it would end in a gun ruckus. Which it would, if those professional or near-professional gamblers caught Buckskin Curtis or big Chet Gearing cheating. . . .

But if they weren't caught, Buckskin Curtis and Chet Gearing would be in the big money when the game broke up. There was no doubt about that.

"That pair of tinhorns," said Shirley, "will be rolling in the tall green clover, too stinking rich to sweat their fancy clothes around a rodeo arena. . . . All I want is the money that belongs to me. You get yours from Chet Gearing, and we'll load Checkerboard Paint and Lizard in a horse car and that horse car will be hooked to the next passenger train headed for Tucson. Then if Buck Curtis and Chet Gearing bother us, it'll be their hard luck!"

"You'll still be Chet Gearing's legal wife. . . ."

"You've got a widow-maker in your warsack. If it comes to that."

Smoky cut Shirley a sidelong look and she caught it with her eyes and held it and then they were facing one another in the moonlight, a little grimly.

"Sooner or later," said Smoky Moore, holding onto the girl's hands as they sat there on

the ground, "I've got to kill Chet Gearing or let him kill me. I've known that for a long time. . . . But this is the first time I ever actually felt like doin' anything about it." He grinned flatly—and kissed her again.

Then he picked up one of Shirley's boots and started to pull it on her foot. She took it from him and reached down inside and tugged and pulled out a soft leather insole about an inch thick. Then she took a similar insole from her other boot and tossed them aside. After that she handed him the boots and he pulled them on for her.

"With an extra inch on the bootheels," she said, "and the insole, I gained a couple of inches. It was Buckskin Curtis's idea. Belle Curtis was tall. And when I wouldn't grow higher than five feet four, it bothered him and he had my boots built up so I'd be mistaken for his wife or sister instead of his grown daughter. For the same reason he dyes his hair, all but the sprinkling of gray at the temples. . . . Buck Curtis is gray as a badger. . . .

"Smoky, I feel towards Buckskin Curtis like you do towards your roping pardner, Chet Gearing. I've hated him, but I've been a sissy about breaking away from him. He'd drink himself locoed in a month, if I quit the act. He's too stove up to trick ride. And without a girl to dress up his act, his trick roping won't earn him tobacco money. . . . I've owed Buckskin Curtis nothing, but until now I've never had the heart or the guts to quit that no-good father of mine. But this finally splits the trails. . . ."

Smoky pulled on his boots, then rolled and lit a cigarette. Regardless of how that high stake poker game turned out, Smoky was breaking his pardnership with Chet Gearing. For the first time in a dozen years of pardnership he was facing cold facts.

SMOKY MOORE had trusted Chet Gearing almost blindly. He'd let big-mouthed Chet do all the talking, let him collect their winnings at the rodeo pay-off window. He'd even let Chet pack their bankroll, because Chet liked to flash a roll of money. He'd never once, in all the past twelve years, asked for an accounting. And at times the bankroll had been thick enough to choke a Missouri mule. The next day it might be thinned down to tobacco money. Smoky only took out enough to pay the feed bill and transportation on their roping horses and enough for entrance fees at the next rodeo. . . . He never knew how much money they had.

Chet talked big money. His biggest bragging was when he had a lone dollar bill wrapped around a roll of worthless Confederate money. That had fooled Smoky for a long time. . . . Yesterday's final pay-off here at Cheyenne had netted them at least a thousand dollars at the window and Chet had won twice, five times that much in side bets. They had broken their own world's record team roping of five steers—hung up a mark for cowboys to rope at from now on. But now the roping team of Chet Gearing and Smoky Moore had roped and tied their last steer. Amen. . . .

For a dozen years, Smoky Moore had taken slurring insults and taunting abuse from Chet Gearing. And he had grinned off the hated nicknames of Runt and Shorty and Sawed-Off—until Chet had made the mistake of dirtying the name of Shirley Curtis. . . . Smoky had taken all that long abuse, not because Chet was big and tough as a boot, but because they were the fastest roping team in the business and could make money enough to buy a cow outfit of their own some day. . . . Chet reminded Smoky of it all the time, holding it up before him like some promised toy dangled in front of a gullible kid. . . .

Now Smoky Moore was going back to town to break up their roping team. And there was only one way he could do it. That was to kill Chet Gearing with a six-shooter. Smoky knew Chet. He remembered the look in Chet's green eyes reflected in Smoky's shaving mirror. . . . It was the hard, merciless glint of hatred—the look of a killer. Chet Gearing had forced Shirley Curtis into marrying him. But for once in his life Chet hadn't bragged when he had something to brag about. Either he'd gotten yellow and lost his guts, or Chet had wanted Smoky to suffer more by hearing the news from Shirley herself.

Anyhow, by now, Chet Gearing would know that Smoky Moore had learned from Shirley Curtis about the forced wedding ceremony. Chet was checking the bet to Smoky; and Chet would be packing his gun. . . . And killing Smoky from here on would be in self-defense, and the Devil in Hell claim the slow man!

Smoky and Shirley got on their horses and rode back to the barn. There they unsaddled and put up their horses and were lucky enough to catch a ride on to town on a hay wagon. . . . It was barely cracking dawn when they got back to the hotel. Smoky said they might as well go to their rooms and wash up and he'd meet her in the lobby directly and they'd go somewhere for breakfast. Then he'd locate the poker game. It might be in one of the hotel rooms. But most likely it was at a gambling joint beyond town, a place called the Road House. It occurred to both Smoky and Shirley that it would be typical of Buckskin Curtis and Chet Gearing to quit Cheyenne right now if they cleaned up a big poker winning.

"They'll cold-deck them Road House tinhorns," said Smoky, "and they'll quit Cheyenne awful fast. They'll hop a freght if they

can't ketch a passenger train. I hope you and I have enough between us to pay the hotel bills and feed bills at the barn. . . . See you in about half an hour for ham an' eggs."

Smoky Moore got the room key at the desk and went upstairs. He unlocked the door and shoved it open and went in. The room was dark, the shades pulled down. He went in cautiously, half expecting Chet to be waiting there, perhaps with a gun in his hand. But the room was empty. He lit the lamp, looked in Chet's warsack. Chet's gun was gone. Smoky dug into his own warsack and got out his six-shooter. He shoved it into the waistband of his pants until its butt was partly concealed by his short jacket.

He washed his hands and face in cold water and was pulling a comb through his wiry black hair when he saw the note lying on the dresser.

It was a hasty scrawl, written on a ragged piece of torn wrapping paper. A .45 cartridge weighted down the note where it lay on the dresser in front of the mirror. It was brief and to the point:

> I'm in a bad tight, Runt. Tied onto something too big. Can't turn it loose. It's all we got. But if you team tie it with me, it's that outfit and our own brand. It's out at the Road House. Them tinhorns play for keeps, so come heeled. Your pardner, Chet.

Smoky Moore read the note through again, then folded it and shoved it into his pocket. He went downstairs without bothering to lock the door when he left the room.

He found Shirley waiting for him in the lobby. She met him with a twisted little smile, her eyes dark with worry. She had a piece of paper in her hand. She handed it to him without a word.

It was a sheet of hotel stationery. On it was written: "HEY RUBE!"

"Hey Rube!" Smoky's voice was flat-toned.

He knew what it meant. It was the old circus war cry—the alarm that was shouted in case of trouble between circus people and the paying customers known as Rubes. . . . The riot call!

"It was shoved under my door, Smoky," she told him now. "It's Buckskin's handwriting. And it means he's in trouble of some kind."

Smoky nodded. He handed her the note Chet had left behind, and his eyes were watching her as she read it. The color drained from her face, and fear darkened her eyes as she looked, finally.

"You're going out to the Road House." It was not a question. Her voice had a dull, flat sound.

Smoky nodded. His grin was a little lopsided. "But I'll be damned if I know why."

But Smoky Moore did know why, and so did Shirley. It was not the money involved. It was something bigger than money could buy—a thing called Loyalty. A cowpuncher's loyalty to his own breed. Smoky Moore owed nothing but a debt of bitter hatred to Chet Gearing. But Smoky and Chet were both cowhands, born and raised according to the cow country's blunt code. Their personal feud was something between Smoky Moore and Chet Gearing. And when the time came, they'd fight it out. But this was something else. Chet Gearing, cowpuncher, had overmatched himself against outsiders. Chet Gearing and Smoky Moore were team tying pardners. And a cowhand don't quit a cowhand in a tight.

"I'm going along." Thus Shirley gave answer to the old circus call of "Hey Rube!" And for the same reason Smoky had. "I'm going with you."

Circus folk, reared in the traditions of the sawdust ring under the big top, are clannish. And, despite everything evil and mean and treacherous in the man, Buckskin Curtis was Shirley's father.

Smoky shook his head. "Chances are I'll be too late. It's daybreak. I'm pullin' out now. You gather what cowboys you kin find and foller up as quick as you kin make it. But don't call in the Law. *Adios.*"

Smoky Moore gave her a quick hug and kiss and headed out the door. He shook awake the sleepy driver of a buckboard.

"Take me out to that Road House. Whip up!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Cold-Deck Showdown

BIG Chet Gearing and Buckskin Curtis had finally overmatched themselves. They knew it before they left the hotel. Buck Curtis had known it when he fetched the three decks of marked cards to Chet's room. He had waited until Smoky had left the hotel room, then put it into words.

"I don't like the looks of the set-up, Chet," he said. "There's five of 'em, and they're all bad hombres. They own the Road House—run it without any outside help. Two of 'em handle the bar; the three others deal. And they deal from the bottom of the deck. When some sucker hollers, they handle him in their own way. And it ain't nice. There's been a few killings, but never enough proof of murder to make it stick in court. The Road House is a bad spot, Chet. We won't stand a thin chance of slipping in a marked deck on 'em. They're using their own cards. . . ."

"Have they got the long green to bank their game?" Chet Gearing was drunk enough to be tough.

"They've got it. It's the biggest bank in

Wyoming. There's nothing phoney about the money. The sky's the limit, all right."

"That's all I want to know." Big Chet Gearing got his six-shooter from his warsack. He strapped on a shoulder holster and shoved the gun into it.

"How you fixed for protection, Buck?" he grinned.

"A belly-gun," Buckskin Curtis slapped a faint bulge in his waistband under the fringed buckskin shirt, "and a double-barreled Derringer in my tobacco pocket."

"The Law don't like the Road House, Buck?"

"The Law is layin' for a chance to nail down its doors."

"The Law wouldn't wail too loud, then, if those five tinhorns got the worst of a gun argument?"

"What the hell you getting at, Chet?"

"Cowboys in town. They like to paint 'er red. They might take a notion to smoke up the Road House. Those five tinhorns might stop some stray bullets."

Big Chet tore off a piece of wrapping paper and took a pencil from his pocket and wrote his note to his team tying pardner, Smoky. He was grinning flatly as he showed it to Buckskin Curtis.

"You leave some kind of a note for Shirley," said Chet Gearing. "She'll fall for it, just like Smoky Moore will grab this bait. There's a lot of cowpunchers in town. They'll be likkered up and rearin' to go. . . . And you and me, Buckskin, we just play it close to our bellies till Smoky shows up with a dozen or fifty cowboy contestants. . . . Then I'll touch off the fuse that'll blow the roof off that Road House. . . . When the gun smoke clears, you'n me will have all the money they've got in their Road House bank. But I'm afraid my ropin' pardner Smoky Moore won't be alive to count his team roper's cut of the proceeds."

"Not that, Gearing! Not Smoky Moore. Damn it man, that's murder!"

"So is this, Buckskin." Big Chet Gearing's gun was in his hand. It was pointed at Buckskin Curtis's belly. The gun clicked to full cock. "But it'd be called an accident. . . . Or would you rather go to the pen for forgin' your daughter's name to that check that robbed her? Sure, I wrote it. But the check was made out to *you*. And you collected the dough. You're in too deep to pull outa this bog hole, Buck, and I'd kinda like to pull this trigger. I got your daughter, and I don't know no easier way to git your bankroll. . . ." Chet Gearing was not bluffing. Murder glinted in his slitted green eyes.

Buckskin Curtis was no coward, but he knew when he saw cold-blooded murder in a man's eyes.

"Put up your gun, Gearing," he said flatly. "I'll play it your way. I'll take my part of the Road House deal. But why do you have to kill Smoky Moore?"

"No man on earth ever licked me and stayed happy long. When a man jumps Chet Gearing, he's in for a rough deal. . . . Smoky knows he's got me to kill. When your daughter Shirley tells him her name is Mrs. Chet Gearing, Smoky Moore is goin' to dig his gun outa that warsack yonder. Then it'll be Smoky Moore or Chet Gearing. And I'm gamblin' all I got on it bein' big Chet Gearing. Now write your note to Shirley and leave it where she'll find it and we'll git out to that Road House. . . ."

Buckskin Curtis wrote "Hey Rube" on a sheet of hotel stationery and shoved it folded under Shirley's door on their way downstairs. Then they got their horses at the livery and rode out to the Road House.

Buckskin Curtis and Chet Gearing were still there at daybreak. They were still playing draw poker. The blinds were pulled low. Tobacco smoke lay in thick layers in the lamplit gambling house. There were no poker chips on the big round table that was covered with green-pool table cloth, only stacks of gold coins and folding money. The gold and banknotes on the table in front of Buckskin Curtis and big Chet Gearing had dwindled slowly but surely during the night. And by the same token the stacks of gold and sheafs of currency in front of the two other players had increased.

There had been three house men at the start of the game. But after an hour, one of them had quit the game. He had quit at big Chet Gearing's suggestion.

Chet Gearing, not nearly as drunk as he seemed to be, had leaned back in his chair, a grin on his sunburnt face.

"Let's all have a drink on the house, and I'll let you Road House gents in on a little confidential. . . . Me'n Buckskin Curtis ain't no pair of wool-blind sheep. We know what kind of a game we'd be buckin' when we come out here. It takes a crook to spot a crook, as the sayin' goes. I've bin trimmin' them rodeo cowboys for a long, long time, and Buckskin here made a good livin' at it with the Bill Show till Buffalo Bill kicked him out. So we're all birds of a feather. Blackbirds. What the hell. . . ."

Big Chet Gearing poured himself a drink from the bottle that had been placed alongside his money. He downed it at a gulp and took the three sealed decks of cards from his pocket and tossed them out in the middle of the table.

"The same kind you boys at the Road House are usin'—factory-marked. We had an idee we could ease 'em into the game. But it's like packin' your own bottle of booze into a saloon. Let one of your boys drop out. Me'n Buck

Curtis will poker the two that's left. It'll be dog eat dog. Lodge brothers; dealer's choice when it comes around. . . . Fair enough, boys?"

"Fair enough," said the gambler who caught the signal from the man behind the bar. And he pushed back his chair.

THE five gamblers were greatly dissimilar in appearance. One could pass for the cattleman he was supposed to be. Another looked his part of a mining man who had found a high-stake poker game. The man banking the game was hatchet-faced, thin-lipped, quietly dressed, bald, a green eyeshade protecting eyes that were cold and expressionless behind rimless eyeglasses. The spectacles had ground lenses that enabled him to read the card markings more easily. But they tended to give the dealer a disarming, scholarly look. The man in white spotless apron and bartender jacket was beefy. He had the battered look of a man who had fought in the prize ring. While the dapper man in the tuxedo was slim, quick-handed, light-footed. And there was the bulge of a gun in a spring holster under his tailored black coat.

The other four were armed. Their guns showed more or less openly. . . . The man in the tuxedo played solitaire at a corner table, his back to the wall, his eyes covertly watching the front door. The front door was locked. There was a CLOSED sign hung on it outside. The back door was nailed shut. The Road House was closed to outsiders tonight. . . .

The five listened to Chet Gearing's talk and cut meaning looks at one another. The ex-prize fighter behind the bar showed a lot of gold teeth in a mirthless grin and fingered the small vial of knockout drops he carried in the pocket of his spotless white jacket. The man in the tuxedo walked over to the end of the bar, motioning to the cigar case.

"No Mickey Finns," he said almost soundlessly when he took a cigar from the box. "Let it alone."

"You're the boss."

The dapper man in the tuxedo walked catfooted back to his solitaire. The man who was dressed like a prosperous cattleman quit the game and got a shot of whiskey at the bar.

"How'd you like the speech?" he asked.

"Like a politician. He should run fer office. Dog-ketcher—or coroner."

"No Mickeys?"

"No Mickeys. It's the Boss, not the customer here, that's always right."

"Looks like a dull night ahead."

"Five'll get you fifty it'll wind up with a bang."

"But till then," said the one who might pass for a cowman, "dull."

He seemed to be right. The game went on. And on. Sweat beaded Chet Gearing's sunburnt face. Buckskin Curtis' dark skin took on a grayish pallor. They kept losing. Chet was drinking too much, now, and Buck Curtis wasn't drinking enough to keep his hands steady. There was a trapped look in their eyes. It didn't look like Smoky was going to show up. . . .

The pug from behind the bar and the man who looked something like a cattleman dozed in their chairs. The one on the tuxedo played his endless solitaire and chain-smoked cigars. The two at the poker table played their cards, and kept winning. It was a sort of contest among card sharpers now. They watched every card that was dealt, and if there was cheating, it was cleverly, expertly done. And Chet Gearing and Buckskin Curtis still were losing. They had less than five hundred dollars left between them, out of over twenty-five thousand dollars. . . . Daylight was streaking last night's sky.

The hack driver would come no nearer than a quarter mile of the Road House. He had been warned off before with shots that came too close. He wanted no part of the five men who ran the gambling joint. So Smoky Moore paid him off and came the rest of the way on foot. The place had a deserted look: A weathered house badly in need of painting. The doors were shut, the window blinds pulled low. Nobody had seen him coming, so there was no warning away from the place. The men inside were unaware of his approach until he stepped up on the porch and across it and shoved open the door that the bartender had forgotten to close when he'd gone outside for some fresh air, an hour ago.

Smoky Moore had no way of knowing what he was walking in on. But he had come prepared to fight and was taking no chances. He turned the door knob quickly and shoved the door inward with his boot. There was a six-shooter in his hand as he stood framed in the doorway, the gray dawn at his back. There was a moment when the place was shrouded in a tense, hushed silence. Then hell tore loose.

It looked like a hold-up to the man in the tuxedo and to the two gamblers at the card table. The battered pug and the dozing fake cattleman were yanked out of their half-tipsy stupor and came awake with their guns in their hands. These five men had nothing but a sneering, bitter contempt for the Law. They had all done time in the pen and hated the Law with an ugly bitterness. Their only fear here had been the constant fear of a holdup. That constant fear of being held up had kept their nerves keyed up. Now it looked like this was it. And because they knew that no one man would have the brainless guts to tackle a hold-up job here at their Road House, they dealt

Chet Gearing and Buckskin Curtis in on the stick-up. And played it like that.

Chet Gearing and Buckskin Curtis had been waiting most of the night for Smoky Moore to show up with a gang of rodeo contestants to back his play. Chet had covertly watched that front door for hours. Now he saw it kicked open and there stood his team roping pardner Smoky with a gun in his hand. It didn't occur to big Chet that Smoky would come alone. Big Chet Gearing felt almighty sure of himself, certain of plenty of cowboy backing when he kicked back his chair and pulled his gun.

Buckskin Curtis, gray-faced, desperate, played it the only way he knew how. He jerked the short barreled .38 belly gun from under his buckskin shirt. His other hand gripped the edge of the big round-topped table and yanked. The table went over with a crash, spilling the stacks of gold coins onto the sawdust-covered floor.

Every gun in the house seemed to explode at the same second. The roaring, deafening crash of gunfire filled the place, shook the old frame walls, reverberated. It was like a powder keg blown up.

SMOKY MOORE, who had touched off the explosion, had no time to be bewildered. It was his first gun ruckus, but bronc riding and roping train a man's brain and muscle and he acted on split-second impulse. He caught a brief snapshot glimpse of Chet's sweat-beaded face and bloodshot green eyes, and of Buckskin Curtis, haggard, old looking, desperation in his glittering black eyes.

Smoky's quick eyes swept the big smoke-filled room. He saw the two men playing poker go for their guns, saw the battered big pug claw for a gun. The man who had taken off his uncomfortable cattleman's boots swung his sock feet off a table and went over sideways in his barroom chair, reaching for his gun as he landed, crouched, on sock feet. And from the corner of his eye Smoky saw the dapper man in the tuxedo slide a gun from under his black coat.

Smoky Moore saw all this in a fraction of a second. He dropped to the floor and rolled backwards out onto the porch as three guns spat fire and three bullets whined through the doorway where he'd been standing a split-second ago. The man in the tuxedo, the fake cattleman, the battered pug had all shot at what they were certain was a hold-up man. Only his quick wits had saved Smoky Moore from sudden death.

He rolled away from the open doorway and was on his feet, crouched. As his hack had rolled away from the hotel in town, Smoky had heard Shirley call after him. And now, with a sudden startling clarity, he remembered what she'd shouted.

"Go easy, Smoky. . . . This could be a gun trap they set for you!"

But if it was a gun trap big Chet Gearing had set for the roping pardner he hated, then Chet was caught in it himself. Because above the roaring crash of exploding guns big Chet Gearing's voice was bellowing:

"I'm shot! Hellamighty, I'm shot!"

There was agony and pain and horrible fear in the loud, harsh bellow.

Then Buckskin Curtis lifted a brittle voice in the old circus cry for help. It threaded like a death wail through the gunfire.

"Hey Rube!"

The supposed mining man and the dealer with the eyeshade were down, dead or dying. Chet had shot one of them, Buck Curtis the other. Buckskin Curtis was crouched behind the overturned table swapping shots now with the pug and the man who had taken off his boots. The tuxedo-garbed gambler boss was crouched behind his card table in the corner, holding his gunfire, his cold eyes watching the open doorway. He barked an order in a flat-toned voice.

"Don't shoot out the lights!"

There was probably fifty thousand dollars spilled and scattered there on the sawdust-sprinkled floor that had to be picked up, somehow.

Chet Gearing's big voice rose over the gunfire again.

"Git in here, Smoky! You double-crossin' yellow son!" A snarl was in his loud voice now. "Charge in, cowboys! Charge the tinhorns!"

Smoky Moore went in shooting. He should have stayed outside, but he went in. He saw the gun in the corner spit fire and felt the burning thudding sting of the bullet grazing his ribs. He shot at the man who held the gun—the dapper, sallow-skinned, hatchet-faced man in the tuxedo. The man was crouched and Smoky's .45 slug hit the gambler boss in the neck and the heavy slug tore away the man's spine at the base of his skull. He toppled slowly. . . .

Smoky twisted and dodged as he jumped in behind the bar. The big pug came around the other end, shooting wildly. Smoky took a quick snapshot. The pug grunted and dropped his gun, clawing at his paunch with a pair of hairy broken-knuckled hands. His whiskey voice croaked: "I'm gut-shot! Don't kill me!"

The man in the sock feet lay on his side, propped on an elbow. His head was bent and he was coughing and each time he coughed he spewed blood from his bullet-shattered lungs. Buck Curtis had shot him. . . .

Buckskin Curtis sat on the floor, his legs

spread out. He was clutching his stomach with both hands and his face was gray as a dirty blanket. Death was already glazing his eyes.

Big Chet Gearing had dragged himself across the floor and propped his back against the overturned table. All around him lay scattered the gold coins and banknotes, some of the money spattered with blood. He had a couple of bullet rips in his tough hide, but that was all.

He cut a quick look around. The shooting was over. Three of the Road House gamblers were dead, another was coughing with his last breath. Behind the bar the big pug was groaning that he was gut-shot. . . . Death was masking the face of Buckskin Curtis. If he had planned it on paper, it couldn't be working out any better for big Chet Gearing. . . .

"Where are yuh, Smoky?"

SMOKY MOORE straightened up and came around the end of the bar. He had to step over the pug's big bulk. He halted a moment to look down into the battered face. The head lobbed over and a death rattle came from behind the gold teeth. Smoky shuddered and stepped over the dead man.

"Whiskey. . . ." Chet sat propped against the bar. "I'm dyin' . . . . Fetch me whiskey, Runt. . . ."

Smoky grabbed a bottle on his way around the short bar and laid down his six-shooter. He was pulling the cork when he saw the gun in Chet's hand, the murderous glitter in Chet Gearing's green-slitted eyes.

Chet turned on that meaningless big laugh even as his thumb was pulling back the hammer.

Neither Smoky Moore nor Chet Gearing was watching Buckskin Curtis, so they didn't see him take the little double-barreled .44 derringer from the pocket of his blood-soaked buckskin shirt.

The gun, small enough to palm in a man's hand, shot, and the soft-nosed .44 slug tore through big Chet Gearing's ribs. His big frame toppled.

"Tell the kid . . . Shirley . . ." Buckskin Curtis' voice sounded faintly through the gun echoes. "Tell her that—that was for her. She'll—understand. . . ."

There was a smile on Buckskin Curtis' gray face when he died.

Shirley got there a little later. With her came the sheriff and an armed posse of cowboy contestants. Smoky Moore stepped outside to meet her.

Shirley said she hadn't meant to call in the Law, but the first man she'd run into was the sheriff. . . . Anyway, it didn't matter now.

The sheriff gathered the money up from the sawdust and counted it into a couple of canvas money sacks. He said that so far as the Law was concerned that money belonged to Smoky Moore. It was gambler money, winner take all, and to the sheriff of Cheyenne it looked like Smoky Moore had come out on top of the heap as a lone winner. . . . And in more ways than one, he added, with an admiring glance at Shirley.

The Law took charge of the five dead gamblers, and the rodeo cowboys gave Chet Gearing and Buckskin Curtis a colorful funeral.

Smoky Moore and Shirley Curtis were married quietly, with their rodeo cowboy friends guests-of-honor at the simple, yet impressive ceremony.

They were quitting the rodeo game. They had more than enough money now to buy the horse ranch in the shadow of the Tucson Mountains in Arizona. But they were in no big rush to get there. Smoky had Lizard and a younger rope horse he'd trained and Chet's rope horse. Shirley had her Checkerboard Paint and two more horses and Buckskin's horse. They bought a couple of pack mules to carry their bed and camp outfit. This was their honeymoon trip. They'd spend it camping out under the stars, traveling slowly along the scenic trail to their home ranch back in Arizona. . . .

They stopped at Cody, Wyoming, to call on the famous Colonel Cody, the one and only Buffalo Bill. He had founded the town and given it his name of Cody. He gave Shirley and her husband Smoky a welcome that would forever live in their memories, something they would want to tell their children about in later years.

Colonel Cody was, he proudly told them, the Justice-of-the-Peace. He was disappointed, he told Shirley, that she hadn't waited until she and Smoky Moore had reached his Cody town before they'd gotten married. There was a twinkle in his eye when he said he would saddle his white horse and ride a ways with them.

Out in the open, under the blue Wyoming sky, he halted them. From his pocket he took a small Bible. Then, with all three of them on horseback, the Justice of the Peace of Cody, Wyoming, performed a second marriage ceremony—one no less simple than the first, but certainly more unusual.

Bare-headed in the Western sunrise, with only their grazing horses for witness, he ended the marriage ceremony with this pronouncement:

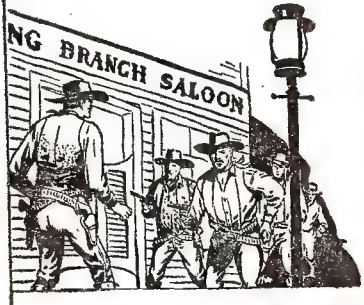
"That which God and Buffalo Bill Cody hath joined together, let no man put asunder!"

THE END

COLT KINGS OF THE FIGHTING WEST

BY FOWLER AND CASE

ONE of the fastest gun-slingers of the Old West was a dentist whom necessity had made a gambler, and a gentleman whom tuberculosis had made a frontier wastral. Doc Holliday, born John H. Holliday, in Valdosta, Ga., was the son of a Major in the Confederate Army. The famous marshal of Dodge, Wyatt Earp, called Doc Holliday "the nerviest, speediest, deadliest man with a sixgun I ever knew." Earp could well be eulogistic. He owed his life to the thin, ash-blond, tubercular Holliday.

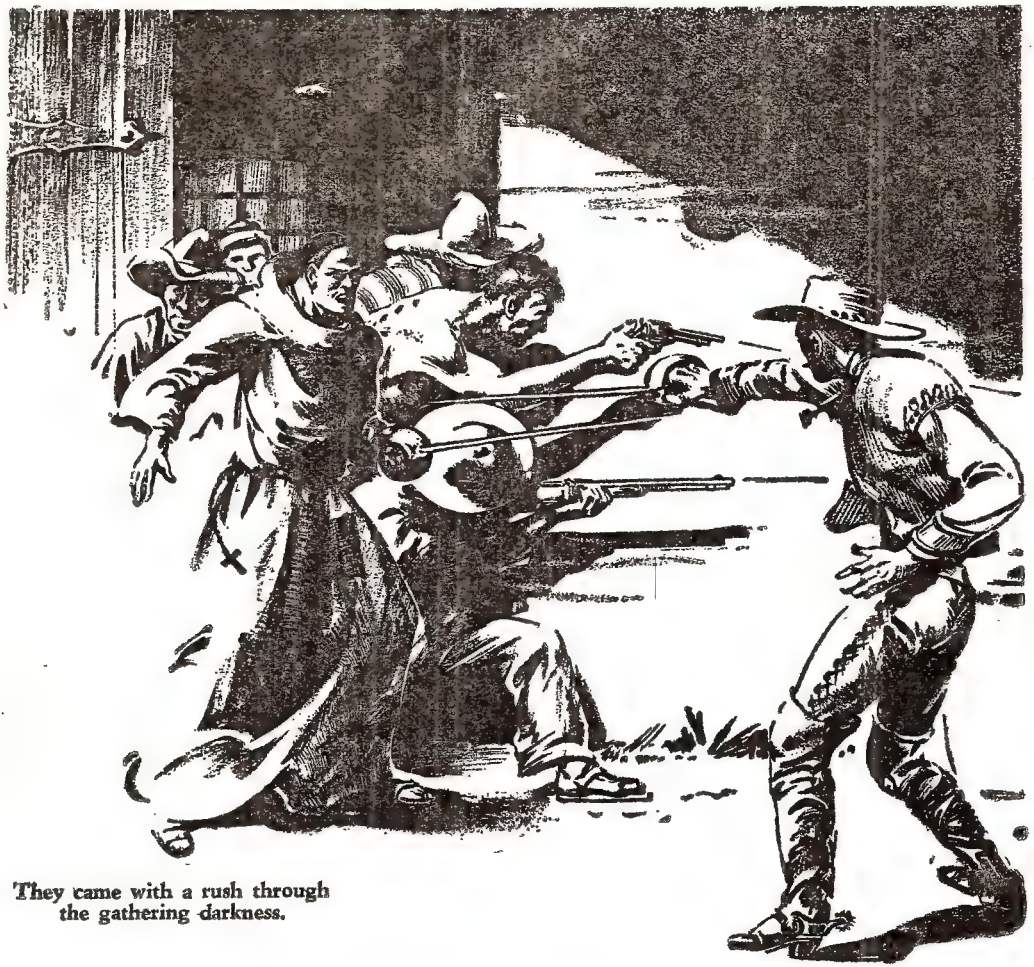


IN the Summer of '78, while Earp was absent from Dodge, twenty-five cowmen headed by his ancient enemies, Tobie Driskill and Ed Morrison, rode in. Earp, returning, ran head-on into the Texans in front of the Long Branch Saloon. They had the drop. "By God," Driskill roared, "it's Earp!" Morrison, his gun up, snarled: "Pray, you white-livered Northern so-and-so, or jerk your gun and—"

"THROW 'EM UP!" barked a voice at Wyatt Earp's elbow as the door of the Long Branch burst open and a rail-thin, anemic-looking figure with a sixgun in either hand stood sharply silhouetted against the light from the saloon. Doc Holliday's cold-nerved interruption was all the break Wyatt Earp needed. Before the Driskill-Morrison crowd could recover from their surprise, Earp had jerked both his guns and Holliday was coolly asking, "What'll we do with 'em, Wyatt?"

WYATT EARP unhesitatingly answered that question by taking a single step towards Ed Morrison. Before any of the crowd could sense his intention, he laid the barrel of his Buntline Special over Morrison's head, and the cowboy dropped as though shot. Simultaneously, Wyatt commanded: "Throw 'em up—all the way!" Six-shooters clattered to the board walk as Driskill and the others meekly obeyed—all but one. Suddenly Doc Holliday's voice lifted: "Look out, Wyatt!" and at the same instant twin reports blended in a shattering concussion. The cowboy who had tried a pot-shot at the marshal missed him completely, but Doc Holliday's single shot put the would-be killer out of action. Doc Holliday made the biggest gamble of his life that night and raked in the pot—the life of Wyatt Earp.

HURRY-CALL FOR



They came with a rush through the gathering darkness.

That strange pistol padre, Friar Robusto, swore that before the ancient Mission of San Juan became the rancho of ruthless Don Risueño, the bones of long-dead friars would once again arise—to answer the challenging battle-cry, "The Devil and Don Diego!"

CHAPTER ONE

The Friar Takes a Hand

FRIAR ROBUSTO came striding down from El Toro, his strong arms swinging a bit too vigorously, his sturdy legs pounding the dusty trail after the manner of one who travels under protest. The July sun struck him with hammer strokes, soaking through his cassock, sucking sweat from his set face and runneling it off his square chin. But if the day was hot, his thoughts were hotter.

Why, he thought, *must Father Manuel have chosen me among the padres at San Gabriel to represent the dispirited neophytes at the sale of Mission San Juan? Especially during the gay beginnings of La Fiesta de Nuestra Señora, La Reina de Los Angeles.*

To Robusto, it seemed a hopeless quest. The government at Mexico City was intent upon

A SIXGUN SAINT!

Colorful Novel of Early California

By Harry F. Olmsted

pushing through to the letter every provision of the Law of Secularization. As a test or maybe for reasons more selfish and sinister, Governor Maurilio Brazos had banished the padres from beautiful Mission San Juan and had placed Apolonio—one of the elder Mission Indians—in charge as caretaker. And because Apolonio made one long siesta of his overlordship, the erstwhile neophytes crept covertly back to scratch the ground and gather the grains and grapes and fruits against starvation and according to lifelong habit.

No longer did the bells of Old San Juan echo against the hills in their summons to the faithful. Avidly, south coast *ricos* and *rancheros* coveted the rich lands, wide pastures and properties of this long time industry of padres, lay brothers and neophytes. Today, at high noon, His Excellency, Luis Ley Maurilio Brazos, Governor of the Californias, would open the bidding. Nothing could save San Juan to the Mission. Certainly not a poor Capuchin friar, whose voice was less than a whisper to an official who sprang from the *ricos* and whose heart was with them.

So Robusto's thoughts were angry and bitter and touched with frustration as he hurried around a point of hills, dipped into the thin bosque of *Rillito de los Patos* and propelled himself into the midst of a strange group.

Sprawled along the grassy bank of the creek were *Indios*—somewhat close to two score men. Painfully thin they looked as they bounced up to face the friar, their hair long and unkempt, their dark eyes lit with an alien fierceness. And though their skins showed evidence of long worn *camisas* and *pantalones* of the missions, they were now stripped to ragged loin cloths. Some had daubed their gaunt faces with ochre, giving themselves a horrible leering look. Not one but gave the friar a sense of nervous tension and evil temper forced close to the surface.

More than anything, their weapons intrigued Robusto. A few clutched short bows and carried quivers of wildcat skin across their shoulders. There was a scattering of fire-tipped lances. But mostly they carried *espadas*—swords of ancient vintage, some inlaid, some with gold and silver hilts. And too there were *escopetas*—a few beautifully inlaid. One carried an ancient *trabuco*—a blunderbuss which must have come to Alta California with the first soldiers of the *padres fundadores*.

Robusto raised two fingers and signed the cross and said: "Bless you, my children. How come you by the relics? Have you discovered some ancient store, or have you sinfully raided an armory?"

Their eyes revealed their understanding and no man spoke until from a thicket came a cadaver with downcurving lips, sunken eyes and hair more wild than the others. Robusto had a sense of shock, for this one was no *Indio*. He wore a ragged cassock which had been pieced and repieced with rags and patches of rawhide. In his wasted hand he gripped a rusted cutlass, and there was madness burning in his eyes.

"Whatever their sins," he said, in a weak and hollow voice, "it is not for you to scold them, *friale*. I am their spiritual leader and have interceded for them and have had them say their 'Our Fathers' and 'Hail Marys.' And now that starvation has reduced us to eating snakes and lizards, bugs and sand crabs, I am carrying out the injunction God has laid

upon me—to become also their material leader."

His eyes tipped up piously. "A Moses, destined to lead my poor children into the promised land that is their rightful heritage. Yea, though we thread the valley of the shadow of . . . "

"And where is this promised land?" broke in Robusto, and felt himself trembling as he anticipated the answer.

"Beautiful San Juan, where these, my children, were born. We were driven from our beloved mission by the forces of Antichrist. The Father Superior, the padres and the lay brothers took the order like slaves and departed for other fields. I stayed with my children, starving with them, freezing with them, sharing their hard lot. Now God has spoken to me in a loud voice. We return to cast out the infidels and heretics and take back what is ours."

"Who are you?" asked Robusto, quietly.

"I am Father Hernando, born in San Blas and schooled at Guadalajara. I served my novitiate at—"

"Look," interrupted the friar. "I am come from Father Manuel, at San Gabriel, to represent these and other *Indios* at today's sale of the mission properties. Whatever may be accomplished must be done by reason and logic and negotiation. Your resort to arms is insane. Look at these poor souls. They are starved and weak and unskilled in the use of their pitiful weapons. What chance would they have against the governor's soldiery? Give up this crazy project. Come with me, all of you, and we will present our case as best we can and plead for simple humanity. Maybe we can touch the heart of the governor. . . ."

"What?" The padre's face went white as alabaster and he raised his clenched hand. "Would you preach disobedience to the holy word of *El Señor Dios*?"

Anger touched Robusto. "And who are you, Padre, that you set yourself up as the sole interpreter of God's will for us?"

The ragged priest tightened his grip on the cutlass and raised it.

Robusto recoiled a pace, believing the man would strike him down.

"Heresy!" he screamed. "You are like all the rest, fat, full-fed, lost in your material comforts, careless whether these poor neophytes live or die. Alas that such as you should bring dry rot to the foundations of our beloved missions! You must be destroyed. Room must be made for new blood, zealous, fighting blood like that of Serra and Palou, Lasuen and Tapis, who were not deaf to the voice of God. No ordinance can make such as you worthy to speak for us. . . ."

His voice rose higher, and his face was white and leprous as he took a step, menacing the friar with his corroded blade. And then his voice fell to a whisper and the fire dimmed in his eyes. He staggered, tried to catch himself. Weakness overcame him and he plunged to earth, face down. He was dead when Robusto knelt and turned him over.

The friar laid the man's own crucifix upon his lips, murmured a prayer and rose to face the murmuring, cowering Indios.

"You see?" he said. "Suffering has crazed the good father. When he would have slain, God destroyed him. The symbol is for you; mark it well. Violence is not the way of the missions. Who is your leader?"

A tall Indio stepped forward. "I am Sancho," he said, in a chastened voice.

"Bury your beloved padre, Sancho, in your own secret place. And meet me tomorrow at this place and I shall tell you the judgment of the governor and the will of El *Señor Dios*. You will do this?"

The Indio nodded. His followers were silent, seemingly crushed. And Robusto, knowing them leaderless and susceptible to the suggestion that this was God's punishment for evil, feet assured they would give up any idea of taking over San Juan by force. He gave them his blessing and then, because the hour was well advanced, hurried on toward the mission.

HE SAW it first from the ridge top and paused a moment to admire the gracefulness of its matched arches. It was good, despite the threat of those assembled within its walls, to see people at San Juan. The thought of its abandonment had been a hurt in him. He thought briefly of the happy events he had witnessed here—marriages, betrothals, the gathering and pressing of the grapes, and of the fine priests who had entertained him during its functions. Then he hurried on.

He crossed the tiny trickle of the creek and caught the road and padded toward the gate, his cassock slapping his legs. Behind him came swift riding horsemen. They reined their horses toward him and would have ridden him down save for his agility. Two hard-bitten vaqueros made running dismounts and seized him roughly.

"Away, mendicant," snarled one. "The mission is well rid of your kind and has no further need of you. Get gone!"

Their leader, a smilingly handsome man in rich charro dress, reared his mount and reined around and stepped lithely from the saddle.

"Here, here!" he roared. "Unhand him, dogs!" He caught his two followers, banged their heads together with an amazing show of strength, and hurled them back. "Have you no respect for the holy cloth? Forgive them, *friale*. They are of low birth and unbridled appetite. Accept my humble apology and enter the mission. They will trouble you no further."

Robusto thanked him quietly, his whole being seething. He looked into the dark eyes of this handsome fellow. Here, he thought, is one with carrion in his mind, deep buried and stinking to Heaven. He stood watching them mount and enter the gate. And he followed them, less sanguine than before of his chance of being heard.

There was gaiety of a sort in the mission forecourt. Horses, the finest in all California, lined the walls. Colorfully arrayed *ricos,* from San Diego, from Los Angeles, from Santa Barbara and as far north as Monterey, were gathered in groups, discussing the sale and their chances. Ruffians in the garb of *vaqueros* squatted around saddle blankets, hilarious as they bet at three-card monte. Robusto caught their scornful laughter as he passed them, hurrying toward the group surrounding the governor and his retinue.

A small troop of six soldiers stood at attention behind the distinguished official, moved out to intercept Robusto as he neared.

"I must see the governor," said the friar.

"You cannot see him, mendicant. At least, not until after his business is concluded."

"Wait, *Cabo!*" There was deep resonance in the governor's voice as he came from the group of ricos who fawned about him. "This *friale* wants word with me; what is it, *Padre?*"

He was a big man and darkly handsome, with a cropped beard and flowing mustaches. He walked and stood like a soldier, and wore his sword with a brave air. His smile was pleasant but it was his eyes Robusto searched first. They were big and round, set well apart, and were soft and brown and sympathetic. Here was a man who forgave easily, whose innate kindness was something to be trafficked in.

"I am Maurilio Brazos. What have you to say, Friar?"

"I come," said Robusto, "from Father Manuel, at San Gabriel."

"A truly holy man, and one having my full respect. You have a message for me?"

"No message, Excellency. Father Manuel has no wish to interfere with those who must execute civil law. But his heart is heavy that the poor *Indios* born and raised at San Juan must be dispossessed, and wander, homeless and hungry, without spiritual guidance."

"Ah, *Friale.*" The governor took Robusto's hand, gazing into his eyes. "Who among us does not grieve at such a pass? But it is the law, and not of our making. I, unfortunately, am the instrument of enforcement, and therefore sometimes unjustly hated. Yes, I too feel bad about this, but I take steps to correct whatever injustice is involved. I will demand that the buyer provide shelters for the poor natives, hire them when it is practicable and look to their welfare. Maybe he will build them a church, then call in a padre. . . ."

These were the words of a kindly man, but a dreamer. Robusto shook his head. "God smiles on your earnestness, Excellency, even while it is misplaced." He turned. "Look at these fellows who will bid for the mission. Can you see one who thinks of any man's belly but his own?"

The governor's eyes darted to the different groups. He smiled. "I confess they are a selfish lot, padre." He singled out those who had ridden in just ahead of Robusto. "Yonder is Don Risueño, the smiling one. It is said he is a *bandido,* a thief, an assassin. He poses as a *ranchero,* down around Punta Lobos. Perhaps he is. Many evil things happen near his *hacienda* and when there is proof that he is involved, I move against him. We can only hope, padre, that he will not be the high bidder today. Ah, there sounds the *trompeta.*" His eyes turned aloft. "It is noon. We will talk of these things later, *friale.*"

He hurried to a dais that had been erected near the fountain, upon which he was to direct the sale. The *ricos* and *rancheros* stirred themselves, moving toward him. An air of expectancy gripped the gathering. This was the moment for which many had waited.

Suddenly someone raised a cry! "Look! A procession approaches the gate, bearing a coffin. A funeral procession!"

All eyes shifted to where a leveled finger pointed. A group of *Indios*—two score of them, bearing a coffin. The weird wail of the dead came to the ears of the watchers. Robusto knew those natives, and the man who sped ahead of them.

Sancho ran to the dais, knelt and lifted his arms. "*Caballeros, amigos,* friends! Allow us to enter the churchyard to bury our dear, dead padre."

CHAPTER TWO

The Devil's Henchmen

ROBUSTO had moved quietly to stand beside the governor at the foot of the wooden steps leading to the dais. He saw the official's lips move. He heard the words that came from the heart of a humane man. "Starved in the midst of God's plenty. Poor padre. Poor *Indios.* I grant you this boon, my *pobrecitos.*"

"Thank you, Excellency," murmured Robusto, but the governor was listening to the sullen murmuring of the assemblage, the growled protests.

A man stepped forth, gray and distinguished. Señor Histriano Castro, one time *comandante* of the presidio at San Diego, said: "It seems unfair, Excellency. We who would make of these properties a *hacienda* for our

children wish no more death under our feet. There is already too much."

Robusto flared: "What would you do when you secure it? Defile the holy ground? And if not, what matters the poor clay of one more poor padre who helped to make these lands what they are today?"

The *ricos* cried him down and the argument swayed hotly. Governor Brazos silenced it. "This, *señores,* I shall decide with the successful bidder. A crypt! Is there an empty crypt where we can place the body until after the sale?"

From the background, Apolonio cried that there was an empty crypt in the holy wall, and that he would prepare it. He padded away to the wall behind the great church which had been destroyed by the great earthquake and never rebuilt, jerked out the ringed stone from the empty crypt and continued on into the old chapel.

Resuming their chant, the *Indios* carried their burden to the place where many of San Juan's illustrious dead lay resting, lowering it with a straining effort that spoke eloquently of their weakness. Then they ranged themselves about the rude wooden coffin and Sancho, their spokesman, began a long and eloquent harangue, a sermon such as he had many times before heard the padres preach over the dead.

From the chapel came Apolonio, carrying flowers. These he pressed into Robusto's arms, motioning to the coffin. Robusto nodded, knelt beside the bier and laid the fragrant blossoms so as to cover the patched and faded cassock. Intent upon this last charity, his busy fingers touched something hard. Questing, he felt the smooth, round barrels of *escopetas,* the slender deadliness of *espadas.* Guns and swords! So this—not the weakness of the neophytes—was why the light coffin with its emaciated corpse had seemed so heavy!

A chill stream ran along the friar's nerves as he realized that in his surprise he had made his search rather an obvious thing. He wondered if anyone had noticed, but he dared not look around. Making a last adjustment of the flowers, he rose and backed from the coffin into two men, one at his right shoulder, one at his left.

At his kidneys was the prick of steel. A harsh whisper came: *"Cuidado,* mendicant! Your lips are sealed, alive or dead. It is between you and Don Risueño, whose *rancho* this place shall surely be, that these *Indios* bury with the priest the priceless holy vessels of Old San Juan, golden utensils inlaid with precious stones. A king's ransom. *Silencio!"*

Robusto nodded, felt the deadly pressure ease and then leave him. He stood unmoving, letting thoughts run wild. A quick glance had shown him that the pair menacing him were the same who had mauled him at the gate. It would do no harm for them to remain in error of the truth. But those weapons? Was there the threat of bloodshed in that coffin? Or were the erstwhile neophytes merely burying with their mad leader the symbols of the hope he had planted to restore the old order?

He had his answer in a sudden pausing of Sancho in his long burial ceremony. As if he were growing very weary, he drew himself up and inhaled deeply, his dark eyes running from the Indios to the restless men who were beginning to mutter for the sale to begin. He spoke then, not in Spanish but in Quanis—an idiom with which the friar had more than a passing knowledge.

He spoke softly, almost carelessly. "We keep at this, brothers, until they withdraw. Then let the killing commence!"

He began a wild, barbaric chant then, a savage threnody, and the *Indios* joined him and they fell into a stamping stride around the bier. The *ricos* and *rancheros,* fast losing all interest in the ceremony, had paid that fateful little aside no heed, if indeed there was one who had understood it. But it drew the blood from Robusto's cheeks and laid a heavy burden upon his mind. His appeal to the neophytes, his hope they had accepted the priest's death as God's disapproval of their plans for violence; these had failed.

Nor had Sancho's injuction been lost upon the governor. Robusto heard him ask someone what the man had said. There was a general ignorance of the meaning. The official's eyes met Robusto's. "You there, *friale!* Do you understand the Indian tongue?"

"I understand, Excellency."

"What did he say then?"

Robusto smiled at the two glowering fellows behind him, cast a glance at their smiling leader who stood back with his *vaqueros,* and moved to the governor's side. He knew what those *renegados* would be thinking. He knew they would be watching like *raptores,* ready to kill him if he revealed what they believed to be the hidden contents of the coffin.

He said: "If you will draw aside, Excellency, I will tell you what he said."

THEY moved apart, the governor looking inquiringly and with some surprise at the friar. And Robusto made the most of this opportunity, stressing points denied him during their earlier talk.

"What Sancho said, Excellency, reflects the desperation of these *Indios* and the hundreds of others who are driven into the brush like beasts to suffer and starve."

"What was it he said, *friale?"*

"He said that with their hidden weapons they will fall upon this assemblage, kill every man and regain the mission."

Maurilio Brazos scowled. "So-o-o? They want war? I will have the *cabo* and his soldiers seize them. I will have them flogged. I—"

"Softly," cautioned Robusto. "All these things you can do, Excellency, but to what end? The Quanis nurse a deep sense of wrong, which even you must admit is just. I know these people, what can and cannot be done with them. If these fellows are denied what they believe to be their rights, the tribe will be turned from orderly subjects into bitter killers and destroyers. Stripped of their last hope, they will never rest upon the decision of this sale. Until they are hunted down and slain to the last man, woman and child, they will harry the buyer, reducing if not preventing his gains and his expected tax to the State. Many men will die, some innocent, for the Quanis will believe that the hands of all men are against them. . . ."

"You say nothing to change me, padre. If they want war, we will exterminate them."

"And perhaps make enemies of the Indios of California, Excellency. Look! You are a kindly man, a just ruler of your people. Will you cast aside the finest opportunity a man ever had to leave here a monument of reverence to your memory? The despot is as soon forgotten as those he destroys. In Mexico City they will listen to your plea that in the interests of peace and to safeguard the revenues of California you delay the sale of San Juan, allowing the Quanis to work the ground in the interests of the State."

"But these men, these *rancheros* who have come from great distances to attend the sale? How can I disappoint them?"

"All will be disappointed and have their trip for their pains, Excellency, except the successful bidder. And when you explain your purpose, they will respect you the more for it, even if secretly."

The governor sighed, removed his hat and mopped his brow. Soberly considering, he sat on the edge of the fountain and Robusto stood before him, answering his arguments, slowly winning the greatest battle he had ever fought. Very slowly. The *ricos* and *rancheros* watched them, wondering what passed between them, occasionally demanding that the sale proceed. The Quanis, led by Sancho, continued the weird ceremony at the coffin, revealing hidden wells of unsuspected endurance. And so an hour passed . . . two hours.

At last, Maurilio Brazos rose, his resistance burned away. He caught Robusto's hand, shook it vigorously. His eyes were shining with the fervor of the friar's contagious vision. "I will do it, padre, though I may fail to win support in Mexico City. The tax argument will help me, there." A smile lit his face. "Your talents, my friend, are more than a little wasted in a cassock. Come, stand by me while I tell them."

Those assembled for the bidding heard him in silence. Sancho quieted a new discourse, listening. A wave of excitement pulsed through the Quanis as the sense of the governor's words became plain.

Brazos ended with: ". . . and so, good friends, I have decided to hold the sale in abeyance. For the time being, this padre—spiritual adviser to the Quanis—will be in charge of San Juan, looking to the welfare of the Indios and burdened with the necessity to prove that the scheme will be a profitable one for the State. If it proves not to be, then I will sell San Juan and you will all be notified."

A babel of talk ensued. Again Don Histriano stepped up to the governor. He was smiling genially. "It is the noble thing you do, Excellency, and while we are naturally disappointed, none of us expected to outbid one certain *caballero* . . ." his eyes went to Don Risueño, who was approaching with his infectious smile. "So Don Risueño alone is the loser. *Adios,* Excellency, and may you have a happy trip northward."

"And may I echo the wish, *Excelencia?*" Risueño bowed courteously. "But the good Don Histriano is mistaken if he believes I am disappointed. Indeed, I am exalted by your judgement of Solomon. As for the padre—" his glance brushed Robusto—"it shall be my pleasure to look after him and his good Indios, protecting them if called upon from all harm. *Adios.*" He shook the official's hand and retreated.

Now there was a general advance to bid the governor farewell. Some of the vaqueros were already riding away. The two ruffians were again at Robusto's flank, with the threat of their pocketed daggers. "Along the garden walk," whispered one, "and into the saddlery."

The friar had no choice, obeying silently and with wary watchfulness. To an observer, it might have appeared that the friar and two acquaintances were intent only upon admiring the flowers. The saddlery door swung open and Robusto stepped across the threshold into the gloom. He saw the blow coming from beside the jamb, tried vainly to swerve away from it. The club struck his head, stunning him. He lunged, hoping to grapple his hidden assailant. The bludgeon dropped him to his knees, struck again. He pitched forward and lay still.

CHAPTER THREE

Hand of the Tyrant

ROBUSTO could have remained unconscious but a few moments. The two ruffians knelt beside him on the dirty floor. They

were tying the last knots in ropes that bound him like a trussed sheep. Above him, the picture of urbane cordiality, stood Don Risueño. At sight of Robusto's fluttering lids, he laughed softly.

"Good! Excellent. It is so hard, *friale*, to judge the weight of one's blows. I feared I had struck too hard."

"What you do to me does not matter," groaned Robusto. "But I doubt if you'd have struck me except you plan evil for the Quanis. If you harm them, Risueño. . . ."

"They will not take kindly to my looting the grave of their dear priest, my friend. If it comes to a fight, I shall, of course, slay them. But I hoped before I killed you that I might bring Sancho here and have you tell him to leave the mission quietly and quickly."

"After the judgment of the governor? That I shall never do."

Risueño shrugged. "It is of small moment how many die here, *friale*. I shall have the priceless altar objects and be gone to Mexico before the killings are discovered."

"Why should you want to kill me?"

"You know too much, Friar. Without you and Apolonio and the Indios, the crime becomes guesswork. And his Excellency, the governor, is not especially good at guessing games."

He paused, looking upon the friar with gloating eyes, laughing silently. "Ha, you have heard of the famous seeress of San Diego —*La Oreja?* Once I went to her and crossed her filthy palm with money. 'I see blood,' she told me. 'When the bells of San Juan toll again, it will be over your corpse.' Her mistake, Friar. She meant your corpse."

Signing his two ruffians to follow, he departed. The door shut behind them, leaving Robusto in near darkness, his head throbbing painfully, his spirit an agony within him. He put his strength against the ropes; they cut him cruelly. But there was no starting the knots.

Wrists bleeding, his body drenched with sweat, Robusto relaxed and lay quiet. From outside came the faintest hint of a sandaled footfall. The door creaked a little and opened inward, a fraction at a time, jerkily. Robusto held his breath, staring. A fat face thrust in. Beady eyes focussed on him.

"Apolonio *mio!*" gasped the friar. "Quick, my son. Your knife!"

The mission caretaker slid inside, knelt. A knife flashed and Robusto's wrists were free. He took the blade. "Thanks to you and to God, Apolonio. Go swiftly. Get the ear of the governor. Tell him Risueño proposes to upset his judgment, by force. If he is gone, tell Sancho to take the guns and swords from the coffin before Risueño can find them. . . ."

Apolonio waited to hear no more. "Pray for us all, padre," he said, and darted away on his errand.

Robusto slashed the ropes that bound his ankles and stood, stamping his feet and flexing his muscles to banish the painful stiffness. Finally he moved to the door, opened it a crack and looked out.

The sun was down and the purple shades of evening were darkening the Valley of San Juan. Sancho and his Quanis still continued their time-killing act about the bier of the dead padre. Near them, apparently intrigued by the performance, stood the score of hard bitten Risueño *vaqueros*. Yonder, vanishing behind a screening arm of the *bosque* rode Governor Brazos with his bodyguard of six mounted soldiers cantering behind, stirring a lazy curl of dust. The friar, watching them disappear, felt his heart sink. Had Apolonio succeeded in conveying his warning to the governor? The leisurely departure of the official party seemed to speak the answer. There had not been time.

Over by the wall, where his horses were tied beneath the sycamores, Don Risueño loitered with six of his lieutenants. They had opened a few bottles of wine and were drinking and laughing as they watched the drawn-out funeral ceremony. Now Risueño glanced across the south wall where, in the distance, the last of the governor's party was passing from view. He tossed his bottle aside and all amusement left him.

"Enough of waiting, my roosters," Robusto heard him exclaim. "I am impatient to look upon the mission treasures. Push those swine out of the way. Kill them if they resist."

His men took last long pulls at their bottles, set them down and, with almost military precision, strode toward the ceremony, two by two. Don Risueño, smiling as if at some secret joke, moved after them, passing the door where Robusto waited to take a position of safety at the corner of the tiled *molino*, from where he could enjoy the show.

Secure in the belief that all eyes were on the pending drama, Robusto ducked from his erstwhile prison and rounded the corner at a run. He circled the row of mud-walled buildings which had, in happier days, housed the arts and crafts of the neophytes. The roared order of Risueño was in his ears. . . .

"Enough of this nonsense, you Quanis dogs! *Vaya!* Quit the mission grounds! Do not return unless you wish to be food for the *zopilotes*. Hold them back, *compañeros;* drive them out. Shoot if they tarry. Diego, you and Carlos tip the carrion from that box and make a feast for our eyes."

Rounding the corner of the last obstacle at full speed, Robusto flashed along the wall of crypts, appearing suddenly, startlingly, before Diego and Carlos could carry out the order of

desecration. One sweep of his arm sent the banked flowers flying from the coffin. On one knee, he thrust in his hands and came out with a pair of loaded *escopetas*. Sancho and his Quanis, backing sullenly before the drawn *pistolas* of the renegades, heard his soul-stirring call to battle.

"Devil and Don Diego! For God, your dead padre and liberty!"

The *Indios* broke at his roar. Guns of the Risueño men were speaking and their bullets were finding the flesh of the neophytes. But nothing, not even death, could halt that rush of the starving, desperate natives. And the dead padre must have smiled in his coffin. These roars and yells and the blasting of guns were children of his madness.

The Quanis scattered like quail, some falling to earth, others darting through the fusillade to snatch up the weapons Robusto handed them from the coffin. Guns and swords, and now there was only the poor starved padre in the coffin and Robusto, rallying his fighting neophytes, fell back upon the chapel, bags of powder and ball clasped to his breast, an *espada* flashing in his right hand.

Only the renegades' need to reload spared them as they fell back across the courtyard to the sanctuary of the chapel. And even as they entered the holy doors, bullets were flying again and Risueño's men were roaring toward them in a charge, whipped on by their leader's bawled commands.

ROBUSTO and Sancho and a couple more stood like a barrier of steel in the doorway, standing off that vicious initial attack that might well decide the issue. Their blades flashed and found flesh and blood and renegades died while the Quanis organized and reloaded in the nave.

Robusto fought with a laugh on his lips. This was God's fight, and it was good to feel a fine Toledo in his hand once more. The sword seemed alive as it flashed.

The *espada* struck and a man fell, screaming. A gun flamed almost in his face and a bullet delivered him a smashing blow at his left shoulder, spinning him. It filled him with agony yet it filled him with joy, for as it twisted him it mercifully spared him the point of a sword thrust at his throat.

"At me, offal of vultures!" he bellowed. "Let's make an end to it!"

He heaved about, his twinkling blade parrying strokes. Once more he found a target and a renegade toppled toward him as he tore his weapon from the man's vitals. But others were behind him and the pressure was too great. The four gave ground, each bearing his wounds, and the Risueño men pressed inward after them, their steel glittering. The chapel echoed to the blasting of the ancient *escopetas* and bullets were streaking across the sills where the neophytes knelt at battle. It looked bad and it seemed that only God could save the defenders of San Juan now. And God answered.

At full gallop, their fine weapons blazing, Governor Brazos, his towering *cabo* and six dragoons, came thundering in at the renegade rear. Risueño men died in that charge and those who survived it scattered. Somewhere Don Risueño bellowed his warnings and threats. He rallied his men and swords gave way to guns and a rain of lead fell against the governor's party. A dragoon fell. Two more were unhorsed.

Brazos, a brave and kindly man, had no will to see them destroyed. "Off horse!" he shouted. "Into the chapel with you!"

They came with a rush through the gathering darkness, crowding inside. The heavy doors slammed shut and the bar dropped into place. Robusto, with clean cloths from the pouched girdle under his cassock, was binding up his throbbing wound, Sancho helping him. Governor Brazo came up, his face pale, his eyes fiery.

"Padre, *mio!* You are hurt."

"The prick of a mosquito's bayonet, Excellency. You are a soldier. Take charge here."

"What is this all about, padre? Whatever ailed this audacious *atrevido* to cause him to break his word and attack before I am out of earshot?"

"He mistakenly thought the coffin of the dead padre held the precious missing altar vessels, Excellency. Instead, there were guns there—guns of revolt, ancient weapons we must thank now for whatever chance we have. I feared Apolonio had not given you my message. . . ."

"Apolonio?" The official looked puzzled. "He gave me no message. What was it?"

Robusto did not explain. Firing rose to a high pitch and the friar signed to Brazos to direct defense against this new attack. Angered that his hope of valuable treasure was vain, Don Risueño was intent now on attaining the end that had brought him here—the taking over of San Juan, its livestock, its rich orchards, vineyards and pastures. Blindly selfish, scorning the certain disaster the seizure was sure to bring. Ruthlessly, he directed this second attack upon the windows. *What is there to halt him?* thought the friar, as he made his way through the gloom toward the altar.

And there, where he had knelt at his last prayer, lay Apolonio, dead. There was a sword thrust through his body. The price this loyal neophyte had paid made Robusto's pain seem as naught. He knelt to touch the dead face.

"You carried the word, my son," he mur-

mured, "and you gave your life to God's business. What man can do more? *Pax Domini sit semper vobiscum. Et cum spiritu tuo.*"

He rose to his feet and it was as if there had been no hurt to his shoulder. A terrible grimness was on his face as he felt his way back to the sacristy. And to himself he muttered: "Devil and Don Diego!" Over and over, those words that had been his battle tocsin in a godless chapter of his life—a chapter from which he had been won by an injunction of a dying Capuchin priest, in Mexico. "Devil and Don Diego!"

He moved to the postern, unbolted it, opened it a crack. There was no attack here because of the thinness of Risueño's forces—thanks to the toll they had taken of the renegades at the beginning. The light was dying. Nobody moved.

Robusto stepped outside, closed the door. He paused a moment, then stripped off his cassock, carefully folded it and laid it at the foot of the adobe wall. Then he removed from his middle a heavy webbed girdle and placed it atop the robe. From one of its pouches he took the striped mask that had become identified with the mysterious Phantom Highwayman—*El Salteador Espectro*—feared in all the Californias by despots, by the unjustly rich and by those who preyed upon the poor. He placed it over his face, his eyes showing luminous in the half light. From another pouch he lifted the magnificently inlaid, matched *pistolas* he had taken from the body of a dead pirate on the Pescadero beach.

Like a statue in pale bronze, he stood there blending into the shadows, his powerful torso bare save for the bandage on his left shoulder, his short, tight harlequin pants revealing the magnificent muscling of his thighs. Into the band of these brief *pantalones* he thrust the pistols, caught up the gold-hilted Toledo, already well stained with the blood of this day's aggression. He took a moment to listen to the turmoil of battle, striving to sift from its chaos the lashing voice of Don Risueño. Then, smiling icily, this lonely symbol of direct justice moved along the shadowed walls on *guaraches* silent as a cat's feet.

At the corner of the saddlery, within the walls of which he had earlier left the friar a bound and helpless prisoner, Risueño lashed himself into a fury, ordering assault upon this angle and that, demanding suicidal entry and death to the defenders, every one. And all this without risking a scratch of his own precious skin. A shadowy figure rounded a corner behind him, approached silently. A soft call: "Risueño!"

The renegade leader whirled. His eyes grew wide and he passed his hand vacuously across his eyes, as if doubting his vision.

"*Salteador Espectro!*" he croaked, and his sword came out ringing from its scabbard.

CHAPTER FOUR

Work for the Phantom Highwayman

THERE was no talk between these two strong men, and each had a good reason for withholding useless words. Like all *Californianos,* Risueño had heard the legends of the Phantom Highwayman, and his guilty conscience told him he could expect no mercy from the avenger save what he won at the point of his blade.

The Phantom drew his own blade, and the *espadas* rang as they engaged. They broke and the Phantom lunged, Risueño parrying the stroke neatly. And, as if in this one maneuver he read the death of his adversary, a soft laugh tumbled across his parted lips.

"A bad judgment, my clumsy buffoon, when you try the steel of Risueño. I shall split your heart and rip off the mask and stick your head on a pole for all to spit upon."

"Saint Francis, patron of the poor, guides my blade, renegade dog. At me!"

The Phantom thrust and missed again and the rapier of Risueño flicked out like the darting tongue of a snake. He cried out in glee as he drew back his blade, dripping red.

The Phantom, struck near the bullet wound, gave no outcry nor other evidence of pain. His legs pumped him forward, his weapon slashing an arc before him with no intent to maim. Risueño retreated before the pressure, parrying the strokes. Their blades flashed in the dying light. The clang of the steel was lost in the shouting and racket of guns about the chapel.

Poised again, having nullified his foe's momentary advantage by the boldness of his attack, the Phantom fenced with all the skill he owned. Risueño forced, relentlessly, the Phantom turning the strokes, and slowly giving ground. He had hoped to find Risueño a vigorous, slashing type of fighter. Instead, the man was cool, calm, and patient, keeping his adversary busy, terribly busy, just to defend himself.

The last light glinted off the flashing blades and The Phantom's back touched a wall. His only alternative now was to step into plain view of Risueño's warriors. This was what Risueño wanted. His face showed plainly he believed his battle won. This bred lack of caution—a fatal error. He feinted and thrust and, after the parry, countered with swift *riposte.* The Phantom's wrist turned. His steel snapped out. Risueño's blade bent and he lost control and cried out, reeling.

The Phantom withdrew his weapon from his opponent's throat. The man coughed, gasped, fell forward. The Phantom caught him as he

toppled, heaved him to his shoulder and stumbled into the shadows with him.

The Phantom's way led behind buildings, hidden from the eyes of those who continued to attack the chapel. He found the foot of the stone steps leading to the coped ledge below the arched ports of the belfry, slogged upward, one tread after another, until he stood beside the great bell, cracked now and removed from its place in the port, awaiting removal.

The rope that had carried the bell's weight hung loose from its *viga*. This, after stepping into the port with his inert burden, the Phantom whipped about Risueño's neck, knotted it and let the body hang.

Now the Phantom stepped down, moving to another and smaller port. With the barrel of his *pistola* he struck three resounding blows against the bell. The sharp echoes, which many a time before had given pause to the devout, bringing peace to troubled souls, dropped to the ears of men convulsed with lust and fury. It commanded a lull. Those forcing the attack and those struggling at the sills turned their eyes toward the belfry. Through the half light, they saw the hanging body of the renegade leader.

The crowd below saw the sinister figure standing on the ledge of another port, clinging to the bell. An awed murmur ran across the churchyard. *"Salteador! Salteador Espectro!"*

The voice of the Phantom rang with the timbre of a bell itself. "Look well on this carrion," he cried, "you whom he led against the poor. He has answered to God for his sins. Look well on him and taste the fate that surely must be yours. Would you come up here and cut him down, or do you deny him?"

A hoarse cry of terror broke from one of the renegades and he turned and ran for his horse. From within the church came the muffled order of Governor Maurilio Brazos. The doors burst open and a tide of screaming, vengeful *Indios* poured out. The soldiers emerged after them, armed and ready.

THE Quanis, still boiling with the hate long preached by their mad monastic leader, leaped after the suddenly panicked renegades, slicing, hacking, thrusting. The dragoons knelt in the churchyard, aiming with calm and terrible deliberation at fleeing targets, the hills echoing the thunder of their fire. Then it was all over and the *Indios* began stripping the dead of their valuables and rich vestments. A few minutes later the friar's robed form appeared in the growing gloom, moving with his quick, vigorous stride toward the governor, the *cabo* and heaving, bloody Sancho.

"Friale!" The governor leaped forward to grasp the mendicant's hand, his eyes shining. "We missed you; we feared for you. Were you busy praying? If so, your prayers were answered—miraculously. The tide was turned in our favor and, of all men, by that rogue, *El Salteador Espectro*. Did you see him?"

"No," smiled Robusto, thinking of the untouched hand mirror in his hidden pouches. "Only his work. It is like him, Excellency. Many hate him, revile him. But it is my humble observation, señor, that they are not our kind of people, yours and mine and God's."

Maurilio Brazos looked up at the swinging figure, his classic face very serious, a deep sigh gusting from his lungs. "From one end of California to the other, I have instructed my *comandantes* to watch for the Phantom, to be alert always to trap him. I have made rich rewards and honors available for the lucky fellow who bagged him, dead or alive. And now *El Salteador* repays me this way—by saving me from one who would have slain me, by giving me the needed argument to reinforce my plea to Mexico City, even though it casts official doubt and suspicion on many a good *ranchero*. Padre, this Phantom must be a man of the people, and well protected by them for the goodness of his heart and the justice of his lawless works. Can you arrange for me to meet him?"

The friar shook his head, smiling. "What would you have with him?"

"Only to take his hand, padre, thank him from the bottom of my heart and reward him with amnesty and a bag of gold."

"From what I know of the fellow, Excellency, he will cherish your thanks and guard the amnesty as his greatest treasure. The gold he cares nothing about, except for the good it does the poor—whether by your hand or his or mine."

"A remarkable man," mused the official. "I shall make it a point to examine his record with care, hoping the better to understand his weaknesses by weighing his strength."

"In his strength he is two men, excellency. In his soul he is less than one. Strange; even as he washes blood from his hands, he earns the praise of a brave and just governor."

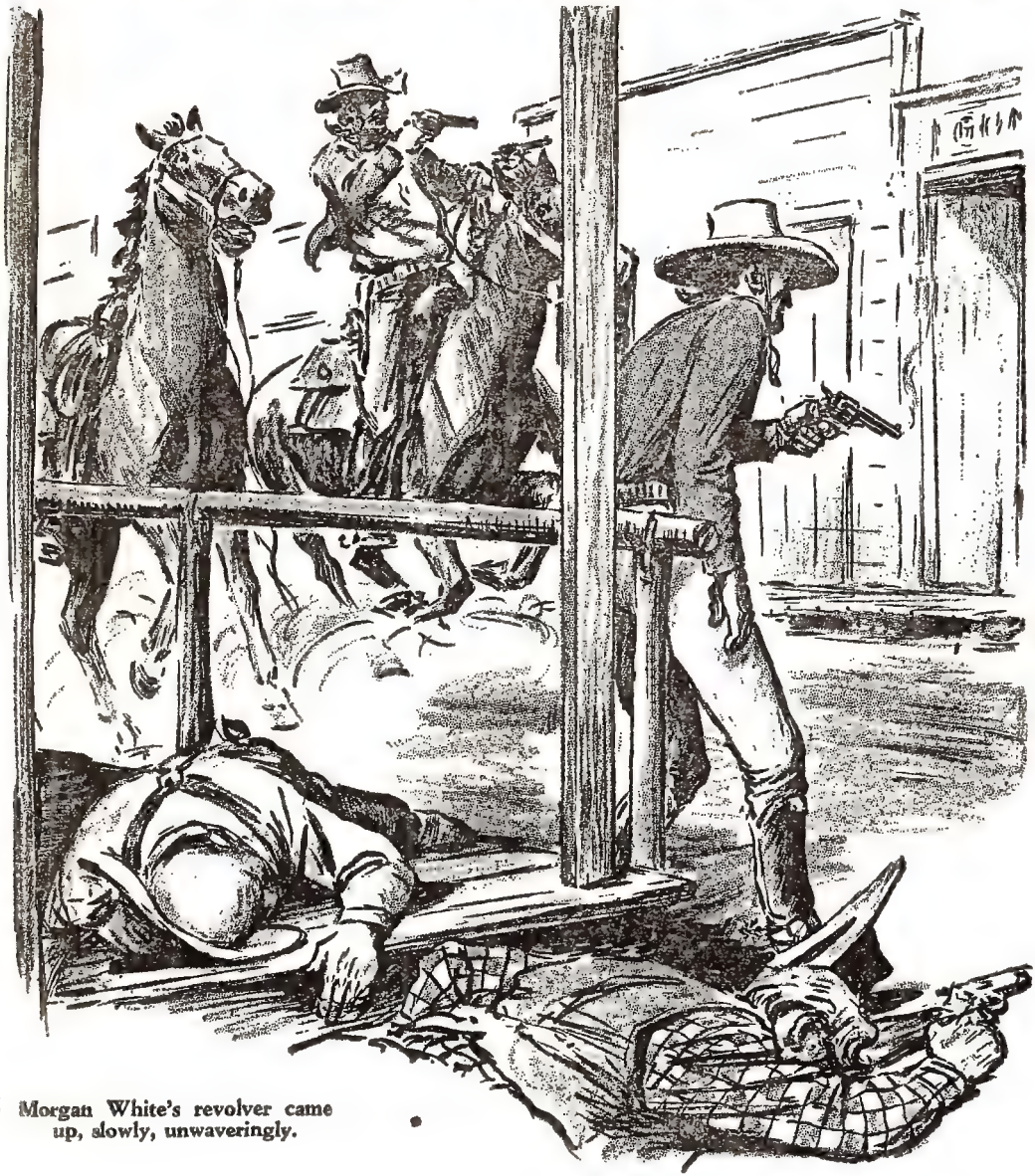
"Not to mention the eternal gratitude of these brave Quanis. From this day forth, padre, I look upon the function of these missions through the eyes of the Franciscans. As long as I am governor, I shall fight for delay, justice and mercy in the law of secularization."

"And may you be blessed with long life, Excellency," said Robusto fervently, "and have Alta California for your uninterrupted rule."

Hard days had fallen upon the missions; but today had brought a rift in the lowering clouds and a beam of sunlight shone through. Here there was work for a man's mind and hands—work, now, that could be done without fear of phantoms.

THE END

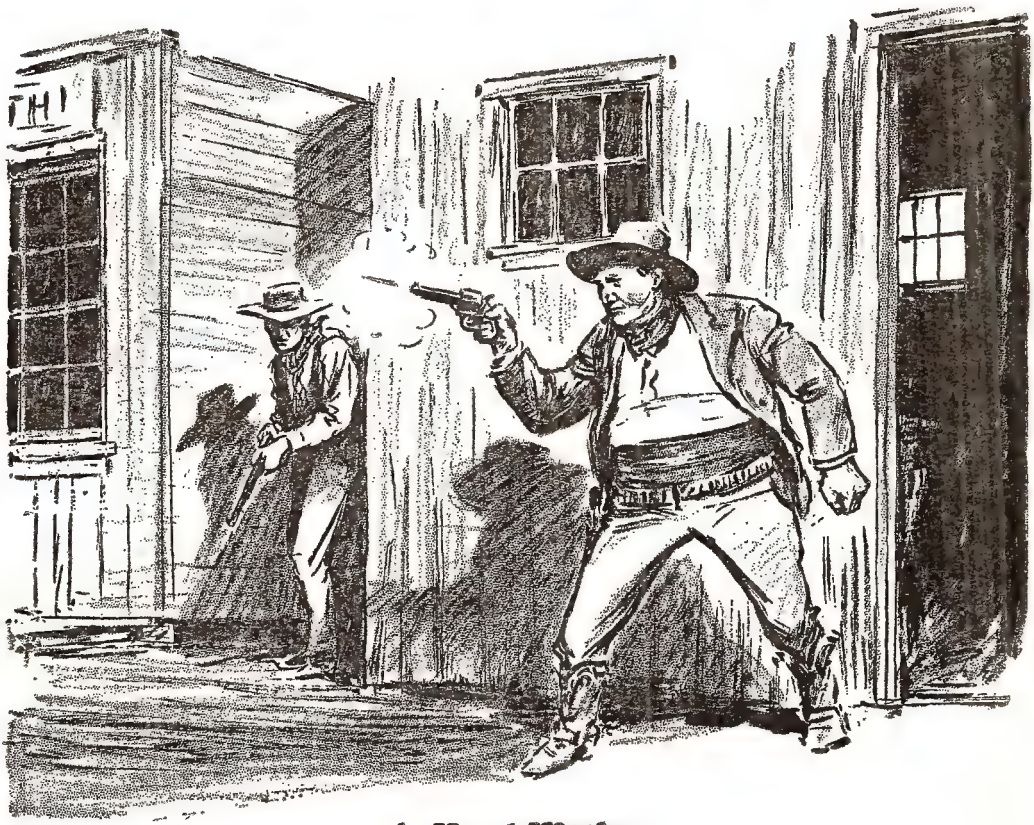
THE DUKE HUNTS



Morgan White's revolver came up, slowly, unwaveringly.

That rotund roustabout, Duke Bagley, had been well warned that Cartridge would be an easy town to enter, but a hard one to leave—alive. . ... So to Cartridge, naturally, he bent Petey's steps, for there a courageous ranch girl needed his help, and there too he would find plenty of Bourbon, not to mention—h'mmm, yaaas!—a bullet in the back!

A HELL-TOWN



A Hard-Hitting
"Duke Bagley" Novel

By
William R. Cox

CHAPTER ONE

Pilgrims Keep Out!

THE name of the town was Cartridge. It was settled in a valley between the Pistol Mountains and the Madera Range, a green valley with a fine river known as Monongahela Creek running down through it, fed by springs from the rocky heights. Because of its inaccessability the railroad had skipped Cartridge, which was part of the peculiar circumstance which made of it a forbidden town.

In all the West there had never been such a place as Cartridge, the story went. Few had explored the valley capital and returned to brag of their experience. One or two liars had come out, but their yarns had been believed only by the gullible. Truthful men came out thoughtfully and said very little, and that only to their close friends. For it seemed that in Cartridge a fearsome thing had taken place.

Isolated and fairly self-sufficient, the valley had settled back into itself. It produced fine, fat cattle, wheat for the markets East, fresh vegetables, chickens, milk. It was one of the most productive pieces of land in the South-

west. It should have been teeming with comfortable, happy people. Yet in ten years the population of Cartridge had decreased by seven souls.

There were only two ranches of importance in all that Cartridge country. One was owned by Morgan White, and called the Running W. The other had recently been inherited by Dick Derring and was known as Powder Ranch. White and Derring: These were names a man could roll on his tongue—names of men who were masters of guns, who lived by powder and ball. These, in the old days, had been the men who shot squirrels in the right eye—because they had a belief that it was quite certain a squirrel hit in the right eye would not survive.

There was a dairy ranch, probably next in size and strength to the cow properties, and it was owned by the daughter of the late One-Shot Carter, a young girl named Jenny Carter, pretty as a painted wagon. Then there were other little enterprises and several nameless, unimportant folks who ran them under the aegis of the White-Derring combine. This empire, nestled between the mountain ranges, had certain other gentlemen who kept order under Marshal Ed Mosely—the same Mosely who had once bluffed Clay Allison in Dodge City. No sheriff dared stick his nose into Cartridge, of course.

All this was known to the stout man on the big black horse long before he rode down from the north on a scout of his own volition. He talked to ebon Petey, as was his custom, and coming to the peak of Pistol Mountain dismounting to give the horse a breather.

"Yaas, indeed," he murmured. "Strangest town in America. Stays by itself, minds its own business—but is that business clean? Mind old Morgan White—afore your time, my four-footed black imp. Stole fifty thousand from the Wells Fargo stage at Upton. Never proved it on 'im and he got away. . . . Take old Derring, the one that's dead. Brought a bunch of wet-backs over the Rio, got into a fracas with the Rangers, got shot and hadda run. Fell in with a miner and went prospectin' to lay low for awhile. He come back rich. Nobody ever heard of the miner again. Yaas, indeed!"

Petey nibbled grass and the Duke wiped his florid face. He was thirsty and a rippling mountain stream was no temptation. He wanted whiskey, good, red bourbon whiskey for his parched throat.

The Duke wore gray, this trip. As he grew older—he was well into his forties—gray seemed more becoming. A hatter in El Paso had made a gray sombrero for him and he had found gray boots, which were stitched with red steers across the insteps and some fancy red scrollwork. His shirt was gray and his trousers and jacket matched in the same somber hue. He wore a red sash, because the wide band served best to cover what was indubitably a paunch.

He removed the hat to let a random breeze blow through his thinning, pompadoured mane. His nose was almost hawklike; liquor had blurred its outlines only a trifle. His mouth was wide and his hazel eyes were wide and handsome and candid. He worked the delicate, long fingers of his right hand and murmured, "Yaas, a town of gun-masters. A veritible hive of experts with firearms. A Boothill full of victims who have dared to invade the sacred precincts of Cartridge. Yaas!"

There was movement in the country below. Duke went to the saddlebag and took out a pair of field glasses. Carefully he searched the bag once more. He removed a spare gun, boxes of cartridges, oil for cleaning and lubricating, a pair of pliers, and a small geological hammer. His fingers touched a smooth surface. He said, "Ahhhh!" and yanked out the bottle. It was empty.

"It's this accursed country," he muttered, flinging the bottle away. "Morgan and Derring came here, crawled into the hole which is Cartridge—and pulled said hole in behind them. Neat trick, Petey. He focused the glasses on the men in the valley.

There was one on a paint horse, going westward across country, slowly as though looking for a stray calf. He wore a red-checkered shirt and a dark, low-crowned hat. There were others, three of them, working through dense thicket, going eastward. Obviously, all these must meet.

Coming from the south was a lone figure, riding swiftly as the wind. Duke swung the glasses. It was a girl. She rode a stock saddle and was wearing some kind of pants, but the Duke could spot a woman any time, from miles away, by the way she bobbed on a horse's back. This woman was in a hurry. And from the way she rode, she was young. . . .

The woman and the four men would meet approximately in the same spot, near a grove of live oaks, Duke computed mentally, putting his glasses away. He had noted at once that the three men in the chaparral could easily have traversed open meadow land and gained the same destination, but that they would have then been visible to the approaching man in the checkered shirt. The Duke took a Winchester from the boot of his gear and unwrapped it. He worked the lever and threw a cartridge into place. He said, "Petey, you stay right here, you fat good-for-nothing. This here is liable to be rough—on somebody."

HE SLUNG the rifle in the crook of his arm, took a hitch at his cartridge belt and sauntered downhill. There was a rocky pro-

montory which would overlook the promising scene below and bring Duke almost within hearing and certainly within easy range. He did not particularly pride himself on his rifle shooting, being a short-gun man himself, but he could do a fair job, when necessary, with the Winchester. He went past a tall tree to gain the boulder's flat top. His soft boots scraped a loose stone.

A man turned. There was something about the way he moved, something almost feline, that seemed indicative of his character. His eyes shone in the daylight as a cat's eyes shine at night, and his brows slanted almost in Oriental fashion. His mouth was thin, the long upper lip shaven clean. His chin was sharp. In his hands was a Winchester which matched that carried by the Duke. The two men stood frozen, fingering the triggers of their guns.

The cat-faced man spoke first. "Get out. Turn around and high-tail and don't even look back, stranger."

The muzzle of the Duke's gun stared unwinkingly at the middle of the other man. Duke's drawl was almost humorous. "Waal, waal. That is plain unfriendly, suh."

"I'm an unfriendly hombre," snapped the other. His eyes moved, as though desperately anxious to get back to what they had been witnessing. Over the man's shoulder Duke could see it all from this vantage point. The single rider was coming along, without deception or fear. The three men were beating their careful way through the brush. The girl was leaping her horse over a low fence, flying as though the devil himself were after her.

Duke said, "*and* sudden. Furthermore, my acrimonious friend, you speak without complete authority. Yaas, indeed. Might point out that my gun's loaded with a .44 cartridge, same as yours."

The man said, "You fat fool, don't make war talk to me! Go back to wherever you left the crowbait that brought you here and keep going out of this country. And don't come back."

The man in the checkered shirt was quite young. This cantankerous man with the rifle, now—he had seemed young at first, but upon closer inspection Duke found to his amazement that despite his quick motions and virile voice, the fellow was all of his own age, or even more. His black hair was streaked with gray and the lines at the corners of the deep mouth were etched by time.

The three men had paused and were examining their weapons. The girl was almost out of it, Duke thought with sudden impatient interest. He could see it all without missing a move.

Duke said, "Man gets to be too biggety, he starts callin' names to strangers. Yaas, indeed. Pants kinda tight, Mister? Feelin' yesterday's oats?"

The man said, "I'll kill you, damn you. You butt-in, you're talking to Morgan White!"

"Never heard of you," lied Duke mockingly. "Who'd you ever kill 'sides Mexicans and Injuns? That is, 'less you shot 'em in the back."

Morgan White, despot of Cartridge, went livid. His finger tightened on the trigger of the gun in his hand and for a moment Duke thought the rancher was going to shoot. Duke's own weapon did not waver, his finger did not tremble. He waited, watching the irate, half-crazy man.

Down below, the man in the checkered shirt paused. There was a wailing bawl. The man chuckled and dismounted from the cow pony he had been riding. He walked on his high heels toward a thicket. On the other side of the briar the three men slid from their horses.

The girl flung herself down from her still-running horse and came around the edge of the trees into the clearing where the cow horse patiently stood. She seized the rifle from its saddle, causing the pony to rear and snort. She cried, "Dick! Draw your gun! They're coming, Dick!"

The man slid back from the calf caught in the brush. His hand dipped, as though by instinct, and Duke gasped, almost losing sight of Morgan White at the speed of that draw. It was the poetry of motion, it was faster than anything Duke had ever witnessed in Tombstone, in Abilene, in Dodge City. The girl joined him and the two of them stood there, tense, alert.

But Duke could not waver from his careful watching of Morgan White, nor did he want to, now. It was the sound of the girl's voice which had done it, he thought. White's features convulsed, twisted.

And then, in an instant, Morgan White was himself again. The muzzle of his gun dropped. His shoulders lifted in a shrug, and a debonair manner fell upon him like a cloak. He said, "Ah, I have a bad temper, I am afraid, sir. Pray excuse me."

He wheeled, ignoring the Duke completely, and dropping off the end of the boulder, walked rapidly toward the pair in the clearing. He called, "Dick! Why, hello—it's Jenny! Hi, there!" His voice was very clear and cheery.

The Duke, his mouth half-open, stood staring. The young couple, their weapons still ready, smiled. They stepped back and Jenny Carter called, "Hello, Morgan. Nice day for a ride, eh? A lot of people out today."

"What have you got cornered there, a catamount?" White asked lightly.

The young man answered gravely, "I dunno, Morgan. Jenny knows more'n I do about it."

"I counted three beasts," Jenny said steadily. "Saw them leave town, heard a chance remark. So I came up to help Dick kill them."

White stared into the thicket. Then he said innocently, "I only see one maverick. Let me help you get him out. . . ."

On the other side of the thicket, as though behind a curtain, the three men hesitated, looking at one another. They were like the three bears of the story book, Duke thought; a little one, a medium one and a very tall one. They were very tough-looking citizens and Duke thought he recognized two of them and could guess at the identity of a third.

It seemed a strategic moment to avert tragedy. Duke stepped out onto the rock, in plain view. He called down, "Hallo, everybody! Can any of you tell me the way to Cartridge?"

The young man was smooth-faced, with light blue eyes and fair hair. He was quite good-looking and compactly built. The girl was dark, her thin face intense, but with a piquant beauty which haunted Duke's memory.

Morgan White said slowly, "You sure you want to come to Cartridge, stranger?"

The three men were remounting their horses. The tall one paused to take a hard look at Duke. He was certainly Pete Owle, the famed gunman who had disappeared from sight ten years ago, Duke thought.

Duke said, "Yaas, indeed. Heard a lot about the town. Must be a nice place . . . Yaaaas."

"When we get this calf loose," White said grimly, "I'll show you the way. It's a good trail—going downhill."

The girl and the young man were standing close together. They exchanged a quick hand grip before the men went in after the calf. The three with guns were gone. Duke whistled and Petey came down. He put his rifle back in its boot, sliding it in with care. Cartridge, he perceived, would be easier to enter than to leave.

CHAPTER TWO

Bushwhack Town

AT FIRST glance, Cartridge did not seem different from any other cow town of reasonable prosperity. People came and went along its wide, dusty main street, called Colt Avenue, and the stores and saloons yawned into the heat of the afternoon with hospitably opened doors. A small man with a bald head slept in front of the Corral Bar, feet straight out before him his battered hat in his lap.

Morgan White paused to stare disapprovingly at the little man. He said to Duke Bagley, "I reckon every town must have one. But it goes against my grain. It's waste, and I hate waste."

The little man opened one eye. He had a rubbery, mobile face which he twisted into a mask of contempt. "Ye'r a dang fool, Morgan. Ye'll never live t' spend yer gold."

Morgan's hands were long and supple. He wore two guns, tied low. His right hand caressed the butt of one of them. He said, "Some day, Bo, you'll go too far."

The drunk had closed his eyes and did not appear to hear the threat. Morgan shrugged, winked at Duke and led the way into the Corral Bar. A Mexican barkeep was solicitous and White said, "I own this place. . . . Own the other two bars, the bank, the blacksmith shop. . . . What did you say was your business here, Bagley?"

"Whiskey, first," said Duke. "A bottle, amigo. . . ." The barkeep slid almond eyes at White, received a nod, and put out a bottle of bourbon. Duke removed the cork, sniffed, smiled gently. "Not this. The good whiskey. . . . Yaas, indeed, Mr. White. I heard Cartridge was prosperous and thought I might invest in a bar here m' self. Made a mistake, I see. Yaas."

The Mexican got another nod from his boss and brought out a brand Duke knew and approved.

White said, "None of my places are for sale. There is nothing in Cartridge you could buy, Bagley, I assure you. We know we have a good thing and we hang onto it. You met Dick Derring, who owns Powder. Miss Carter holds the Big Farm . . . most of the other folks hereabouts work for us."

"Or owe you," murmured Duke. "Nothin' for sale, eh? Not a thing?"

"Try to buy, and you'll learn," answered White curtly.

"Not even a soul or two?" Duke poured a half-tumbleful of the whiskey, passed it under his prominent proboscis and drained it slowly, letting the cooling alcohol soothe his throat.

White said harshly, "Mebbe I don't understand you, Bagley. I thought you were a gambler—a tinhorn with a stake. I thought you were out for profit and had Cartridge down as a town to be shook."

"Yaas," Duke said. The whiskey warmed his stomach, eased the fine lines at the corners of his eyes. "Indeed. How to show a profit. In one easy lesson. Yaas. Stay away from Cartridge."

"Take your time," said White generously. "Enjoy our town for a few days."

"M'mmmmm," nodded Duke over the brim of his second drink. "Mighty nice of ye, White."

A man came into the bar and ordered a drink. He spoke to White respectfully, almost as though he were about to doff his hat. Two more entered and went through the same

procedure. All eyed Duke covertly, almost shamefacedly, then paid strict attention to their drinks, keeping a distance at the bar between themselves and White.

A slouching middle-sized man came in from the rear. He had a scar over his left eye. He paused a few feet from Morgan White and wiped a yellow, drooping mustache with his left hand. He had sunken, gray eyes and a long chin. He said, "Anything you wanted, Morgan?"

"Not right now." White's glance conveyed some kind of message, Duke thought. The rancher went on, "This here is Duke Bagley. He'll be around a day or so."

The stooped man wore a badge on his flapping vest, Duke saw. He looked closely at Duke, then said, "Happy Jack, when I knew 'im. Twenty year ago."

Duke said, "Is this a town where they put old names on folks, White? By Gad, must I stand here and be insulted by one of your jackals in this fashion, man?" His eyebrows drew fiercely together as he glared at Ed Mosely.

The Marshal of Cartridge said calmly, "Okay, Bagley, okay. . . . Don't get red-headed. . . . See you later, Morgan." And he drifted away.

White said curiously, "You go out of your way looking for it, Bagley. How have you survived so long?"

"Reckon I'm about your age," Duke said, his amiability restored. He drained another huge draught of bourbon. "Might ask the same question—but I won't. Too many questions bein' asked."

White said abruptly, "You are quite a character. Maybe we'll have a poker game for you before you leave, Bagley. . . . Must go now. *Hasta luego.*" He went quickly, like a man with a definite goal.

The Duke finished his drink, slapped a gold piece on the bar. His store of coins was diminishing—there had been no profit in his enterprises for some time now. He had been, he considered, far too altruistic in his latest adventures and it was time to call a halt. The stake he had cherished, after all the wastrel years, was too small to buy a big bar in El Paso or some other hot city. It was necessary to replenish his horde, all of which he carried around his not inconsiderable middle, in a money belt.

The barkeep gave him change, charging him for the drinks, and Duke picked up the bottle, which was half full. The barkeep said, "No, no, no, Senor. . . . Thees I did not charge to you."

"Eh?" Duke ogled the brown man. "Very well, my sepia friend. You may give me a pint bottle of the same."

The Mexican took back the half empty quart, handed over a pint and smiled toothfully, awaiting payment. When Duke turned away, he screamed again, "No, no, no, no *no!* You have not made the payment!"

"Fool," thundered Duke. "I traded you the half-quart, didn't I?" He strode from the bar, conscious that the eyes of the silent, drinking citizens were upon him. He was sorry for the bartender, but he had deliberately performed his old trick for the benefit of the citizenry. He had defied Ed Mosely for the same reason—a dangerous thing to do, he well knew. In the back of Duke's head an idea was slowly taking form—not a definite plan, just a germ of an idea. It was based on the obvious fear of these people for Morgan White—and upon something Duke thought he had detected in the cock-of-the-walk himself.

THE street, at dusk, was quiet. People were at home, or going there for the evening meal. The saddle shop was closing its doors. The name over the portal was "One-Shot Carter" and in the rear of the neat shop Duke could see the girl talking to one of her Mexican workmen. He went by, noting that behind the store there were rooms, and that a second story arose in the rear, unlike the customary false fronts across the street. He deduced at once that the girl lived in town.

The hotel was also a tavern, with only four rooms for rent, all on the ground floor, a circumstance which displeased Duke, but to which he was forced to submit. A dark-visaged man called "Tanner" ran the place. It was fairly clean and an Indian woman fetched hot water for a bath. Duke got out some range clothing, enlivening the costume only with a red neckerchief. At dark he was searching for a restaurant. He found it and at a table in the rear were the two people he wanted to see, Jenny Carter and Dick Derring. They had their heads close together, but Duke paused and interrupted them.

In a low voice he said, "Miss Carter, I saw the whole deal up on Pistol Mountain this noon. Who are the two men who train with Peter Owle?"

To Derring, the girl said swiftly, "I keep telling you; now do you see?" She lifted her dark eyes to Duke and said, "We can't trust anyone. You were with Morgan White. How do we know. . . .?"

"I knew your mother," Duke said. "Yaas, indeed . . . Miss Jane, we called her. Fine woman. Married One-Shot afore I ever left the West and went on the River. Can't prove a thing, Miss Carter, of course. But I seen those three comin' through the brush. They were on the other side of the thicket when you roused Derring here."

The young man said, "But Owle, Gray and Dulle work for Morgan White. I mean, they're

well known to be Morgan's men. He came in when you did."

Duke said, "Think it over. I won't take up your time." He bowed with courtly grace, smiling as though he had only been exchanging the time of day, and took a table in the corner, careful to face door and window. He was wearing a Colt in his holster for people to see, but he took a .38 revolver with a short barrel from his pocket and eased it beneath his sash, where it would be more convenient while he was at table. He ordered food and the Chinese waiter scurried under the lash of his voice. He was impatient with the two young people across the room from him.

As he ate, he watched them and saw that Jenny Carter was trying to convince the son of Dan Derring. Reluctantly, it seemed, he was giving in. Twice he looked appraisingly across at Duke, who pretended not to notice. When they had finished their meal, Derring bowed shortly to Duke as he followed the girl from the restaurant.

Duke slid from behind the table, replacing the .38 in his coat pocket, but keeping his hand upon the ugly hideout gun. Swiftly he moved his bulk in the path of the young couple who had just left. Ducking into an alleyway between the smithy and the general store he saw the girl open the door of her shop and enter. Dick Derring swung away, then paused to roll a cigarette, as though deliberating with himself.

The movement came from the dark space alongside the saddle shop. Duke saw the glint of something shiny and drew his .38. He fired straight into the deep black behind the shiny object which had caught a stray beam of lamplight from behind the saddle shop. He heard a man stumble, then the echoes of two shots were on the air over Colt Avenue and people were coming on a run.

Duke blew the smoke from his revolver and thrust it into his pocket. Walking around behind the excitement of the crowd he slipped back into the restaurant and resumed his seat. He was gravely eating apple pie when Dick Derring entered and slid into a chair opposite him.

Duke said, "Not in here, sir."

"I was shot at," said Derring. His young face was tight, not with fear, but with belligerence, Duke saw with satisfaction. "Some dirty bushwhacker shot at me."

"Uh-huh," said Duke. "Come to my room after dark. It's the third on the left. Tap on the window, like this." He rattled his fingers on the table and Dick imitated him. Aloud, Duke said, "Er—I may be able to play later. Stud's my game—or draw poker, suh. Yaas, indeed, young feller, glad to accommodate the boys."

Derring nodded and got up. He used a .44 revolver, Duke noted. The holster was worn down slick. That would be his father's holster, of course. The boy was too young to have worn it smooth like that.

Old Dan had been a tough hombre, too. Old Dan and One-Shot Carter and Morgan White. Now it was only Morgan, the youngest of the trio. But Morgan had been a hellion too, Duke had heard from authentic sources.

And it seemed evident that Morgan White now wanted to swallow the Derring fortune, along with everything else. And to marry the Carter girl, naturally—Duke had not missed it when, at the girl's voice, White had run to prevent action which might be traced to him by Jenny Carter.

It was a pretty kettle of fish, with Dick Derring until now unwilling to believe that White was his enemy. It was understandable, after seeing Derring make that remarkable draw, why Morgan White had moved cautiously, with three proven gunmen, against the youth. But it was plain as the nose on Duke's face, which was extremely plain, that in the end Dick Derring hadn't the chance of a tissue paper cat in Dante's Inferno of surviving for any period of time.

The Duke finished his meal and strolled back to the hotel. He would look around town later. Right now he wanted to talk with Dick Derring.

CHAPTER THREE

A Shot in the Dark

AT MIDNIGHT, Duke was in the Corral Bar. He had consumed the pint of bourbon while he talked with Dick Derring, and he felt pleasantly elated now and quite interested in the clientele of Morgan White's biggest bar.

Marshal Ed Mosely was there, alone in a corner, drinking rye. He cast an appraising eye upon Duke and said, "Hiya, Happy Jack?"

"Gay," nodded Duke. "Yaas, indeed, you old, infirm, dessicated remains of a cowtown officer. Gay as a cricket."

"Don't git too gay," warned Mosely. "I'm onto you."

At the bar was Morgan White, and with him were two soberly dressed men who seemed to vie with each other in saying, "Yes-sir, Morgan. . . . You're right, Morgan." They would be the local banker and dry-goods merchant, both under heavy obligation to White's bank.

Also segregated into a tight group at the other end of the bar were the Three Bears. Peter Owle stared straight at Duke, unwinking, his face carven in an expression of hatred. Orny Gray was the middle one, John Dulle the little fellow. They were three of the fastest

gun-slingers the country had ever seen, Duke knew.

It was a town of gun-masters, all right. Old Mosely was as good as any. Probably the very Mexicans who worked for White were gun-happy. Duke reached inside his vest pocket, bellying up to the bar. He got out three little red balls and rolled them between his fingers. The Mex barkeep opened his mouth to howl protest about the deal of that afternoon. Duke began juggling the balls in his left hand. He made them into a little circle of red fire, going up and around. He passed them, and they became but two balls rising and falling like a thin fountain stream. They dropped into his hand, became most mysteriously and illogically four red balls. He held them up, turned his hand this way and that, made another pass. There were no red balls at all.

The Duke's right hand delved behind the bar, found the good whiskey, brought it to light. No one had partaken of it, he saw with satisfaction. He nodded at Morgan White, held up the tumbler again, half filled. "With your permission, Senor."

White said, "You owe me for a pint."

"Match you, double or nothing," said the Duke. He brought out a worn coin, held it on his thumb.

White smiled and said, "Cancel the debt. I've seen two-headed coins before."

The two men with White faded away. Duke moved down the bar with his bottle and said, "Now about that poker game. . . ."

"You shouldn't juggle those balls in public," White said. "I'd never play poker with a man whose hands are that nimble."

Duke complained, "What's a man to do, suh, for fun? No poker, no tables for faro. What sort of place we got here, White?"

"I don't know," said White. He stared into his drink. "It ain't the same as yesterday, that's for sure." His catlike eyes lifted, examined Duke.

Duke said, "I thought I'd take a look around for a few days. Mebbe somethin'll turn up for the sale after all, my friend."

"I've bought about everything," White said. A strange, morose mood seemed to have gripped him. "What I can't buy, I generally take. But there are some things you and I know can't be boughten. At our age . . . we know."

Duke said softly, "Yaas, indeed. But not to be abandoned because a price hasn't been put upon 'em, eh, my shrewd friend?"

"I'm clever enough. I don't need such a man as you," said White frankly. "You're slick, all right. Ed Mosely tells me you were quite a young feller. Killed several men, didn't you? Tricky, that's Bagley."

Duke said, "I'm gettin' old, as you pointed out. But until lately, things seemed about as always. . . ."

"Bah! You're lyin'. You're not that old, nor am I. Why, I'm as good a man as ever, and I can prove it." He swung away from the bar, catlike again, his eyes gleaming. His hand sped down.

At the end of the room sat the drunk, Bo Butterly. His feet were on one chair, he leaned back on another. Gently he snored.

White's gun threw down. The shots hammered one atop the other. A leg of the chair on which the man sat went to splinters. He tilted, began toppling to the floor, hat still over his eyes.

A shot picked the battered sombrero from his face. Another smacked through the exact center of the crown.

Duke said calmly, "Very nice shootin' . . . Yass, indeed."

At the end of the bar, Owle, Gray and Dulle were watching, expressionlessly. These men were all experts with the pistol, and White's exhibition meant little to them.

As if he suddenly realized this, White said, "I've had one too many drinks. . . . *Hasta luego*, Bagley." And he went abruptly out the door of the bar.

Duke hooked his elbows on the mahogany. Butterly had scrambled to his feet and was cursing in several languages. Duke gestured with the bottle and the little man, still blaspheming against White, came forward to drink.

Owle said sharply, "Shet up, Bo. Lay offen White."

"A pox on you and him and every cowardly saddle bum in this country," cried Butterly.

Owle started forward, hand on his belt. "The country'd be better off without you. I got a notion. . . ."

"Get over that notion," said Duke coldly.

Owle stopped. Facing Duke he let his eyes travel up and down and around the big frame of the intruder. He stepped back a pace, as though to give himself room. From the bar came Gray and Dulle, each spreading out a bit.

Butterly warned, "Look out, Bagley! They mean business."

DUKE said calmly, "Yaas, indeed." The red balls came into his left hand, began making their circle. No one knew better than Duke how little chance he had against thesse gun-slingers. But there were Cartridge people in the bar and he could not back down. People had been backing down to this coterie for a long while.

Duke said, "Gray won't be so good." He lowered his voice almost to a whisper. "I see you're wearin' a bandage under your shirt, Gray."

The middle-sized man winced, his hard face

paling a little. Owle swept an arm wide and said loudly, "You come here lookin' fer trouble, Bagley."

"Mighty brave, shootin' a young feller from an alley," Duke said in the same voice, distinguishable only to the trio who threatened him. "You-all better drift afore I yell that out loud for everyone to hear. You won't look so big if that gets known. Seen you-all this mornin', too, gettin' ready to dry-gulch the lad. . . . Even Cartridge folks wouldn't cotton to that, eh, my gun-throwin' friends?"

Owle said, "Bagley, you talk too damned much with your big mouth."

The saloon doors swung and Dick Derring walked through and stood behind the three bad men. Duke could have leaped forward and embraced him. Bo Butterly moaned with relief and sucked a whole drink down in one gulp.

Duke said, "Hiya, Dick. . . . Yaas, indeed. . . . We was just talkin' about who mighta thrown that shot at you this evenin'—and why. . . . The boys was just sayin' how rotten such a trick was. Yaas, indeed."

Owle turned to the bar. He said, "Never seed the day I hadda shoot anybody from behind. That's for true, and you know it, Derring."

"I'll catch the man," Dick nodded, smiling gently. "Bagley thinks he saw him. Furthermore, we have reason to believe he got pinked. Mosely is on the lookout—and so are we."

Owle said thoughtfully, "You an' Bagley, huh?"

Dick shrugged. "Bagley happened to see it. Have a drink, gents. . . ."

The situation suddenly had become less dangerous—at least, for the moment. Orny Gray could not use his left arm, but he tried valiantly to conceal the fact. It was of no consequence, Duke thought, watching these hired men of Morgan White's—none other could be trying to kill Dick Derring. Yet there was one point: It irked Owle that he could not come at Dick Derring openly. The gun-masters had pride.

Duke thought about that, absently buying another round for Bo Butterly. The little man had lapsed into silence and after an hour he drifted from the bar without even a "thank you" to Duke and found another chair upon which to sleep. The hat with its tell-tale holes rose and fell as he breathed.

At midnight the Mexican closed up. Duke left with Dick Derring and watched Owle and his cohorts mount and ride westward.

Derring said, "They got a camp on White's land. The Big Farm runs out along the crick, y' know, and there's a triangle where Running W and Big Farm meet. That's where they shack up."

"They don't pretend to work?" Duke shook his head. "Beyond me, how some people get by. Yaas, indeed."

Derring slid a sidelong glance at him, but Duke was serious. It had been over twenty years since the stout adventurer had turned his hand to a day's labor, but if he was aware of that fact it did not appear upon his countenance.

Derring said, "Everyone knows they are Morgan White's men. But what can anyone do about it? When my dad was alive, he kept a couple old gunmen hangin' around. Why, I took gun-slingin' lessons when I was six. Jenny Carter can outshoot nine men outa ten. Guns are taken for granted hereabouts."

"In other words, top gun is top dog."

Derring said slowly, "I've just begun to think it ain't right. Mebbe I saw this comin', in the back of my mind. Morgan White was cautious around dad—and One-Shot, of course. But when they got killed. . . ."

"Do tell! Killed? Your daddy and Miss Carter's? At one and the same time?" Duke asked sharply.

"That's right; guess it never got out. We keep to ourselves here in Cartridge," said Derring. They had paused in front of the hotel and now Derring lit another cigarette. The glow of its tip showed the strong muscles about his mouth. "Dad and One-Shot went after a catamount that had been gettin' some calves. They was into Pistol Mountains just about where we first came on you this mornin'."

"Tchk, tchk," said the Duke. "Musta been bad."

"Near as we can tell, they tracked the cat to a tree, came together in the shale, under Hanging Rocks. One of 'em fired and the shot set off a rock-slide. Those Hanging Rocks will begin to slide if conditions are just right and a shot is fired beneath them. Well, dad and One-Shot were caught. They must've been killed outright."

Duke said, "How long ago did this thing happen, son?"

"Goin' on four years," said Derring. "Since then, Jane and me have been doin' all right on our own—until jest lately. Now I know why it hasn't been so good lately—since you told me about Morgan White."

Duke said briskly, "You'd better stay in town tonight.

The young rancher said doubtfully, "Jenny and me both owe the bank. We can't repay you for helping us."

"Did I ask for pay?" Duke's air of wounded indignation was perfect. "My dear boy! I see injustice being done, so what can I do? Ride on? No, a thousand time no. Pay. . . . Pah!"

"I didn't mean—" the young man began.

"I'll get my pay—from another source,"

said Duke confidently. "Now think no more of it. We shall approach the vile host of this bag of fleas and make secure for the night. You can sleep first; I have some whiskey still in my flask. . . ."

HE MADE the sleepy, grumbling attendant change him to a larger room. Then he made Derring lie on the bed and sleep. He swigged out of the bottle and removed his boots. His feet hurt; he had small feet of which he was quite vain, but of late they were protesting against toting his bulk about. He groaned slightly, caressed his toes and said to himelf, "Did I ask for pay? If I did, the old Duke would certainly be slipping. Yaas, indeed. A den of rascals. Morgan White is clever, and deadly as a cobra. In a shoot-out we would stand to die in the first exchange. . . . It will take the two of us—Derring and myself. One man could not handle them."

He turned over the things he knew and the things he surmised, and they were all fairly evident. Here there was no mystery. Morgan White was greedy and in love and he knew but one way to act—ruthlessly, letting the chips fall where they might.

There was a noise outside the window. The Duke's stockinged feet came down, the .38 gun slid from his waist band. Like a big shadow he melted across the room, hugging the wall. The noise sounded again. He coiled himself, ready to spring.

There was a long, almost unbearable silence. Duke balanced the gun, wiping perspiration from his hand. The landlord was treacherous, of course, and changing rooms had not helped. Yet, it seemed risky for them to attack two men when they could later pick off one at a time. It was bold, but senseless. Morgan White probably feared that Duke would attack. White was no fool—he wanted to be sure, and get in the first blow.

Once more the scraping noise sounded. Duke was too much the old Indian fighter to show himself. He tensed again, the gun ready.

Behind him, the door slowly opened. Duke's attention was on the window. The key in the lock of the door had easily been turned from the outside. The portal swung inward and the first hint Duke had of danger was a rush of air from the hall.

He dropped flat on the floor, trying to swivel his bulk to get in a shot. There was one small but distinct explosion. Then the door slammed to again.

Duke came up, roaring, dashing for the door. He saw a shadowy figure going around the corner of the hall and fired, but knew he had missed.

There was no sign of anyone. Every door was discreetly closed. Duke slammed back into his room, risking all to strike a match. He saw the blood on the blankets and cursed for ten seconds. By then he had regained his wits and found mocassins. He shoved the .38 into his waistband and went out through the front, a plain target for anyone who cared to shoot at him. He ran all the way down to the saddle shop and pounded on the side door. He heard the girl get out of bed, her voice low and cool, calling, "Who is it?"

He called out hoarsely, "It's Bagley. You better come. They shot Dick."

She said, "The hotel? I'll be right there."

He wheeled and ran back. He got inside the room with his heart in his throat, but as he expected, they had not thought he would desert Derring even to get a doctor. He went over and looked at the wound. It had been a derringer, he was pretty sure, the old style, which used a ball. The hole in Derring's chest was nasty.

The young rancher opened his eyes. He said weakly, "Hell of . . . a shock. Never was . . . shot before. . . . Who?"

Duke said angrily, "I wish I knew, son. Yaas, indeed. . . . But I'll find out. I promise you I'll find out. . . ."

"I hope so," murmured Derring. "Hate to—to peg out not knowin'. . . ."

Duke set his jaw and made himself await the girl and the doctor.

CHAPTER FOUR

On Exhibit!

MORNING came and the vigil ended when Dick Derring's fever broke. The doctor pronounced him out of danger, but warned about exertion. Jenny Carter turned her wan face to Duke and said, "I can sleep now."

The big man said, "Yaas, indeed . . . knew he'd be all right. . . . He's got plenty of resistance. . . . Yaas, indeed."

The girl left, and sitting alongside the bed where Derring now slept soundly, Duke's head nodded and he napped. His jowls were noticeable in the light which crept by the blind and his eyelids were thick and heavy.

Yet in another ten minutes he was awake and alert. His old silver watch said that the time was six o'clock. He arose, scowling. He was afraid to leave Derring alone lest the news be out that the young rancher was alive. On sudden inspiration he stepped into the hall and caught a Mexican youth listening intently at the door.

"You would spy on the dead?" The Duke scowled fiercely. *"Vamos, bribon!"*

The Mexican fled. Duke locked the door behind him. Derring would sleep for at least an hour, his experience with gun wound cases told him. The Duke could use that time.

He went out back and saddled Petey. The

big black stallion was rested and full of beans, and it took Duke ten minutes to get him cooled off and on the road. They galloped westward.

There was, Duke knew, need for swift action. Morgan White, through his henchmen, had moved promptly, lest Duke and Derring move first. Only by lucky chance was Duke left free to move. And against the forces arrayed with White, Duke had no illusions as to his chances of survival.

He circled the edge of what he knew must be Big Farm. The land lay rich and the farmhouse seemed palatial to his appreciative glance. One-Shot had built well for his daughter. At the triangulation of which Dick had told him the Duke rode carefully, his hand upon the rifle which he had taken from the boot and was holding now across the pommel of his saddle.

He saw no sign of Peter Owle and his crew, which did not surprise him. He rode in close enough to sight a cabin which showed evidences of permanent habitation, but no one was at home. Reigning Petey about, Duke set his course for the nearby spot on Pistol Mountain where he had first sighted the actors in this swiftly moving drama.

The big black galloped across the flat and willingly plodded up the mountainside. Working in a circle, Duke looked patiently for the spot on the shale which Dick Derring had described to him. In a short while he came within sight of Hanging Rocks. He could not miss the perilous formation which extended over the loose rock of the shelf on which Petey walked as though his hoofs were threatening precious hen's eggs. He reined in and Petey, eyeing the terrain, remained respectfully stock still.

Duke said, "Yaas, indeed, my four-footed nimble-wit. You get it. You know it's dangerous. Now, s'posin' we had a lion caged in yon caves, my ebon companion of evil years? Eh? What say you, limb of Satan?"

Petey whinnied, and Duke chuckled. "Yaas, indeed! Even a horse knows. Now we'll try somethin' else." He lifted his Winchester, picked a spot among the overhanging rocks. He fired.

There was a rumble and a couple of boulders promptly disengaged themselves and rolled down upon the shale below. The Duke fired again, and again. More rock thundered down. He sat, staring at his accomplishment. Presently he reloaded, curbing Petey's restlessness with a sharp rein.

The first echo came, then a whizzing sound which Duke recognized. Between fear and satisfaction, he bent, urging Petey with his heels. The black horse had heard bullets singing past his ears before and was not reluctant to leave. Slipping on the shale, throwing sparks from his hoofs, Petey lit out east.

Two more shots sang down the length of Hanging Rocks. Duke risked a quick glance back over his shoulder. He could see no one, but he had a rough idea of the direction from which the shots had come. Who had fired them did not matter at the moment, he new, he changed Petey's course in the interests of safety. The black thundered onto good footing and lunged abruptly into a grove of cottonwoods.

It was time to head for town, lest Dick Derring be awake and fretful. Duke let Petey run and made the journey in what was probably a record. He found the Mexican lad crouched inside the stable and left Petey in the boy's hands. He strode into the hall and the manager of the place intercepted him and spoke guardedly of the undertaker. Duke cursed him and thrust him aside. He unlocked the door of his room, shutting out the hotelkeeper with his bulk, and went inside.

Dick opened his eyes and said, "You been ridin'? What did you learn, pardner?"

Duke said curiously, "How do you know I didn't shoot you myself last night? I could've, y' know. I could be in with Morgan White. You don't know me."

Derring said dryly, "Everything else aside, you couldn't have missed killin' me, could you?"

Duke muttered, "Mebbe. . . ."

Derring said, "Looks like I'm gonna live, huh? I feel pretty good."

"You'll be okay in a week," said Duke. "Yaas, indeed . . . if someone don't git to you again, my fortunate young friend. Got to have you moved outa here. This is too convenient a murder hole. The innkeeper, for instance, is dishonest. Could this place be owned by Morgan White?"

Derring nodded. "It's another of his enterprises."

"That man sure does get around to ownin' things," remarked Duke admiringly. "He's got the biggest bump of acquisitiveness I've met in years. Makes me a mite envious. Like a good thing m'self . . . yaaas, indeed. This fella's the biggest grabber in seven States, I do believe!"

Derring said, "I'd admire to get outa here, too. But there's no hospital in Cartridge—and no other hotel. We don't get many travelers, you know."

Duke said, "I shouldn't imagine so . . . no, indeed! But I know a place."

The doctor bustled in, wiping sleep from his eyes. When he had finished his examination he straightened, grinned and said, "You'll live a hundred years before that wound'll kill you."

Duke said, "Can we move him—on a stretcher?"

"Certainly, if you're careful." The doctor nodded and went out.

Duke went out back. He found a window which was shuttered, and measured the shutter with his eye. He went close and drew his gun. Carefully, he shot the blind loose from its fittings. It fell to earth without shattering, which proved its sturdiness to the Duke.

The innkeeper came running. The Mexican youth came running. Duke was popping two fresh shells into his big Colt. He said, "Yaas, indeed, gents. Jest pick up the shutter. Move lively, please."

They eyed his gun, the rocklike expression on his face. They obeyed. He waved them indoors, covered the shutter skilfully with all the blankets he could make stay in place. He placed the make-shift stretcher on two chairs, bent and picked Derring up in amazingly strong, gentle arms, and deposited him on it.

He said grimly, "If one of you should stumble, wouldn't it be jest too bad? You'd prob'ly hurt your shin. And then you'd die of lead poisoning." He spun his revolver on his finger with such rapidity that the innkeeper and the Mexican youth recoiled. Then they each bent and took an end of the shutter, gingerly but firmly.

THE sun was getting high as the strange cavalcade marched down Colt Avenue. Duke had holstered the gun, but he kept in position to observe the movements of his drafted aides. At the saddle shop he called stentoriously, "Miss Carter! Are you up and doin'?"

She came out, fully dressed.

Duke said, "Get a couple saw-horses in place in the shop." He went in with her and whispered, "Act like this is all planned."

They placed two wooden horses so that the ends of the shutter would rest on them. The pair from the hotel gently deposited their burden, sighing their relief. At a gesture from Duke's gun hand they scuttled back to their dens.

Duke said, "We'll bring in a cot and set it up right here in the shop. Then anyone kin look through the window and see how Dick is doin'. Meanwhile, I'll circulate around town an' tell a few things I know and a lot more I can guess. I reckon people'll be plumb interested in Dick's condition then—and his future."

Derring said, "What you been up to, Bagley?"

"Just investigatin' some things," said Duke mildly. "Yaas, indeed . . . lookin' around and about. . . . Nothin' to prove in a court room—but then, what would the old Duke be doin' in a court? Perish the thought!"

Jenny Carter said, "But—should Dick be here. . . .?"

"Pish and tosh," Duke snorted. "The window can be looked into by anybody in town, can't it? Your job will be to keep Dick screened off from people lookin' in, but still in sight from outdoors. Might be we won't have to keep this up but one day. You can tell folks Dick got shot—by a murderer. Leave it to them to guess who instigated it, huh?" He winked at them jovially.

Jenny Carter said, "It's Morgan, isn't it? He means to kill Dick. He wants to take over—everything."

"Let's us wait until later," Duke said evasively. "No use callin' names until we got the goods on the guilty ones. I got some people to see."

He went out and hadn't taken five steps before Marshal Ed Mosely slid out of an alley and said, "Wanna talk to ye, Duke Bagley."

"Happy Jack, to you," said Duke. "You found who shot Derring yet? Or ain't you admittin' you knew he was shot?"

Mosely said doggedly, "I wanna talk about you."

"Derring has been shot at three times in two days. The third time almost killed him," said Duke. "It's a hell of a damn poor law officer can't find out who is after Derring."

Mosely said, "Bagley, you better git outa town. I'm tellin' you straight. There's people here would think nothin' of throwin' down on you, smart as you are. This ain't no ordinary town." He gnawed at his yellow mustache, the scar over his left eye burning red. Mosely, Duke recognized, was agitated.

"Waal, now," said Duke judiciously, "I'll tell ye, Ed. These people done threw down on my friend Derring three times. He's still alive." Two citizens of Cartridge had paused within earshot, studiedly looking the other way, pretending no interest. Duke's voice boomed, "Yessir, despite the guns of murderers, Derring lives. If they are no smarter than that, after three attempts, I don't reckon old Duke ought to run like a scared rabbit from them. Even if an ole, gun-throwin', tough man like yorself says so, Ed."

Mosely said uncomfortably, "I ain't tryin' to run you outa town, Bagley. . . ."

"'Course not," said Duke wholeheartedly. "'Twas jest for my own good. . . . People is always doing things jest for the other fella's good. Like I bet whoever shot Dick Derring while he lay in my bed figgered Dick'd be better off without future worries, a-sleepin' comfortable in his nice, warm grave—alongside his murdered dad."

Mosely jumped as though someone had stabbed him in the rear. "His whut? Have you gone completely loco, Bagley? Dan Derring died in a lan'slide. Everyone knows that."

The pair of citizens had been joined by three more, one of them a sunbonneted woman with sharp, inquisitive features.

Duke said blandly, for all to hear: "Lot of

nonsense spoke about landslides caused by gunshot under the Hanging Rocks. Went up there myself this morning. Did a little shooting into those rocks. Boulder or two rolls down. Betcha anythiny you say nobody ever brought down more'n a few big rollin' boulders by shootin' in there."

The eager woman edged closer and the menfolks, emboldened, followed. Mosely began backing off. He said, "Bagley, you're talkin' through your sombrero. You're talkin' crazy talk, man."

"Yaas, indeed," said Duke. "But the only way to cause a landslide up there in Hanging Rocks is to get on top and set off a charge. Nice way to kill a couple people, all right. Fake up animal tracks to the edge of shale. Then, when the hunters close in—set off the dynamite and start a 'landslide' on top of 'em."

Mosely said, "Man, you've gone stark, ravin' mad. There's still time to shake the dust of this town from your heels and you better take it."

"Now you run along, old feller," said Duke soothingly. "Yaas, indeed. You seen better days, I know. You done bluffed Clay Allison once—I was there, you remember, Ed?—but now you're takin' orders and you ain't the man you were. Yaas, indeed, you got my sympathy, Ed. Run along an' report—or do you want to say some more to old Duke?" He stood poised, his thin, long-fingered right hand hovering suggestively over his gun holster. The little knot of citizens instinctively scattered, all except the woman, who boldly stood her ground.

Mosely hesitated, then turned and almost ran blindly into the woman. She gave him a shove and said, "Pshaw, I've been a-waitin' for someone to show up that old man! Mister, who *did* shoot at pore young Dick Derring?"

"Madam," said Duke, bowing from his slightly over-sized hips, "That I will divulge later. And thank you, ma'am, for your interest." He walked on down Colt Avenue, leaving a prairie fire of discussion behind him—he hoped.

CHAPTER FIVE

Powdersmoke Pay-off!

BY NIGHTFALL a minor miracle had occurred in Cartridge. Four ordinary, private citizens, two of them employees of Morgan White, had asked Marshal Mosely who was gunning for Dick Dering—had asked it satirically, as though they knew the answer but did not expect to hear it from Mosely's mustached lips. Two of the riders from Powder had come in and were walking the streets, their guns worn prominently, holsters tied down.

Duke sought out these two, lads named Gill and Battersly, and told them to stay close to the saddle shop. "You don't have to go inside," he said. "Miss Carter can handle that part, along with the nurse we sent in. But keep your eyes peeled, so that no other bullet could sorta enter through the window and git Dick again."

Gill, a tough-looking youth, said, "Okay, Bagley. But when the rest of the boys gets in, we're conductin' a leetle investigation of our own."

Duke said, "Time enough, later. Yaas, indeed. You boys go against gun-slingers and plenty of you are bound to git killed. I know you ain't scared. 'Tain't that. But gun-masters don't figger like you boys."

He sent them to their reluctant posts across the way from the saddle shop. Derring, he saw, had hired good, brave lads but had shied away from the professional gunmen his father and One-Shot and Morgan White had preferred. It was a natural procedure for a steady-going young man—but Duke wished there were a few rascals left from Powder Ranch for the risky job that lay ahead. Morgan White was due in town at any moment. And behind him would come the others. . . .

It was not the shoot-out which Duke feared now. It was the tricks. He had been through many a gun-fight and his own instincts were sure—otherwise he would have died many years ago. His own legerdemain with a Colt, a short gun or a derringer had saved his bacon in dozens of frays. Man for man, he was not skeptical of his ability in a show-down with guns.

But this would not be man for man, and it would not be straight shootout. He cogitated, trying to put himself in Morgan White's place. Apparently all the cards were on the table. White's men were Peter Owle, Orny Gray, John Dulle and the Marshal. That made five of a kind in Duke's mental category—a hell of a hand. Duke held nothing, not even deuces.

But if White did not come soon, a potential potent weapon was fogging in the minds of the hitherto spineless citizens of Cartridge. Dick Derring was better liked, of course, than Morgan White. Duke had started the suspicion that White and the Three Bears were after Dick's hide—and the hint had found fertile soil in minds which heretofore had been afraid even to think. Duke's defiance of Mosely—successfully carried off—had started men to wondering if Morgan White's strength really was as great as it seemed.

It came down to the fact the White's strength was the strength of five, but those five were a hell of a lot. But there were shotguns in Cartridge, and they could be emptied of their birdshot and reloaded with heavier charges. There were men who had not dared to move freely since Dan Derring and One-

Shot Carter had died beneath sliding rock—which could have been sent down by a hidden murderer. There were men who remembered the schism between Morgan White and the two other old-time gun experts, when Derring and Carter wanted to build the town and open its gates to commerce and White had refused.

All this Duke learned as the day passed. Mosely left the town at noon, and Duke sighed, wishing the Powder boys had come in by then. But he kept Battersly and the redoubtable Gill faithfully watching the saddle shop where Derring rested. White controlled too many factors in the town to take further chances.

Jenny Carter slipped out as the sun slid westward and said, "You haven't eaten nor slept, I'll wager. What is going to happen, Duke?"

"Waal, Miss Jenny, I'll tell you," said Duke, grinning. "Either you are goin' to have a town in which to raise yore kids—or you ain't gonna have no kids to raise. Are you scairt?"

She said steadily, "Dan Derring and my father were murdered, weren't they? You know that?"

He said, "Waal, now, Miss Jenny, I'll tell you." And he repeated the story of his morning's experiments. He said, "Look at it thisaway: If Morgan White comes boilin' in here and tries to kill me and Dick, it's a fact he planned to do murder."

She said slowly, "You've read Morgan White carefully, haven't you?"

"You suspicioned him afore I ever got here," Duke said shrewdly.

"Yaas, indeed," she mimicked him spiritedly. "You think I'll stand by meekly and have my father murdered and my—and my friend Dick Derring shot?"

Duke interrupted her: "Your job is to stay by Dick. Yaas . . . stay there and make them other boys watch close. 'Cause that's where a smart man'd strike—at the weakest point. A man in bed. I'll look after the rest."

She said, "You'd go against the five of them? Alone? Duke Bagley, you're not that good. Nobody is—no one in the world."

"Yaas, indeed," Duke beamed. "You're right, Miss Jenny. Nobody could go against all five and win. But I figger the rest of Cartridge has come to a new way of thinkin' by now. And they don't like Morgan White."

She warned him swiftly, "They won't stir unless they see the tide going against White. I'm telling you, Duke, they've been held down by fear too long."

He said, "Waal, then, Miss Jenny, I've miscalculated."

"You have," she nodded. "You've given credit for spirit where there is only the beginning of it stirring."

Duke murmured, "That ain't good. . . . Nossiree, that ain't smart. And I haven't quite figgered a profit yet, neither. . . . Could be I was barkin' up the wrong tree? Yaas, indeed." He bowed courteously to the girl and said, "Thank you, Miss Jenny. Mebbe you warned me in time. I'll jest take a look around town and see. You watch that sick boy. . . ."

HE STARTED to walk down Colt Avenue toward the restaurant. Jenny had been right—he needed sustenance. He had not taken a drink since last night, either. His way of life certainly had been upset in Cartridge.

A man who leaves a trail littered with too many dead men creates a bad impression—but Chaffee had ridden the owlhoot long enough to make his corpses count! In William Heuman's masterful July novel he's sure enough—

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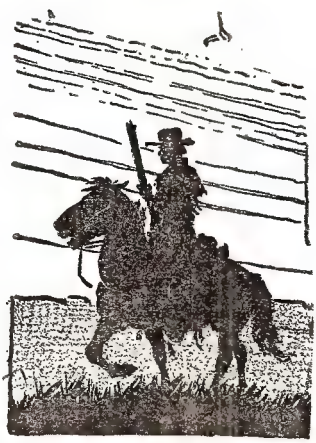

FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

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Morgan White came into town before he could reach the eating place. The owner of Running W was riding a fine chestnut stallion. He was dressed in Saturday's finery—tight-fitting doeskin trousers, a blue silk shirt, a cream-colored sombrero. He rode slowly in from the west, a not-so-young Lochinvar, his eyes going to the saddle shop and remaining there until he had ridden by and was before the tie rack of the Corral Bar.

Across the way the Duke braced himself, bringing his weary shoulders up, tucking his ample paunch inside his wide belt. He listened intently while he kept his gaze upon Morgan White. He heard no sound of approaching horses, and that was bad. That meant that Peter Owle, Orny Gray and John Dulle were already in town, strategically spotted where they could do the most good.

It also meant that the open was no place for Duke. He started for the door of the Corral, thinking to get there at the same time as Morgan White, thereby putting the rancher in the line of fire.

White hooked a knee over the horn of his saddle and stared cynically at the hurrying big man. "Going somewhere, Bagley?"

At the warning note in White's smooth voice, Duke slowed down. His back went against the wall of the smithy. He drawled, "Not 'specially, White. You want to see me about anything?"

"Oh, I dunno," said White. His voice was silky—if a cat could talk, it would have a voice like that, Duke thought. "Accordin' to where you were headin', Bagley. If it was out of town, now. . . ."

Duke considered. There were a couple of people across the way, staring at him, and at the man forking the big chestnut. Morgan White was so calm, so sure of himself, that one man dived for a door and disappeared. But a couple more came from side streets and lounged, hands in pockets, watching. Were they waiting for Duke to take action? He could not know. Jenny had warned him that they were not ready. . . .

Slowly, Duke shook his leonine head from side to side. "Leavin' town is the furthest thing from my thoughts, White."

"I warned you," White purred. "You had only a little time to enjoy Cartridge—then you were to leave. The time is up."

There was no sight nor sound of Peter Owle and his followers. Duke spraddled his long legs a bit and nestled his chin on his chest. He said, "I never figure to let a man get me in a corner too tight for me, White. It looks like it might come down to you and me, at that. But first I'd kinda like to know somethin'. . . . How much powder did you use to set off that landslide to kill Derring and Carter?"

The men across the street leaned forward, eyes popping. They could hear plainly every word Duke's basso profundo threw upon the air of Cartridge. They waited with bated breath, staring at Morgan White.

The rancher arched his back, like a cat ready to spit. His hand hovered close to the front of his coat. Yet he hesitated, only his narrowed eyes displaying his anger.

Out of the corner of his vision, Duke saw a pair of scuffed boots, stretched out into the sunlight on the porch of the Corral Bar. These could belong only to Bo Butterly, who, alone in Cartridge, would not keep his boots clean. Down the street the Powder Ranch boys were restless, but stood their ground.

A trickle of perspiration ran down Duke's back and his hands were almost too damp. He reached mechanically into his vest, bringing out the three red balls. He began carelessly to juggle them. He said, "Yaas, indeed. Reckon you don't care to answer that one, Morgan White. Reckon Mosely's already carried the tale that I figgered out how you killed Derring and Carter. . . . Where are your hired men today, White? You don't want to start anything until they get here, eh?"

White just stared whitely down. Time ticked away. And then the awareness of danger was upon Duke like the finger of death. He felt it, and the coldness of the sweat now pouring down his stout body startled him. He saw death in Morgan White's face, felt it blowing its breath upon him.

Down the street young Gill shouted and raised his Winchester. A horse began running and Battersly fired from the concealment of a doorway and John Dulle tumbled into the dust of Colt Avenue as Morgan White screamed a curse.

The Duke flung his bulk sideways. Morgan White was making a draw. Duke fired off-hand with the .38 he had slid from his sash. Morgan cursed again as his right arm sagged. His revolver twisted like a leaping trout as he attempted the border shift, tossing it high for his left hand.

But Duke was now throwing his second shot, to the right. He had felt the breath of the bullet fired point-blank from the veranda of the Corral Bar. He fired again, and Bo Butterly, on his knees, dropped a .41 derringer. Both of Duke's shots had got him, one high, one low, and now the town drunkard lay kicking out his treacherous life.

It had been clever, Duke thought grimly, even as he moved, fighting for his life. The planting of the drunkard had indeed been a master stroke, and until John Dulle had appeared, a second too soon, attacking Dick Derring in the saddle shop, Duke had scarcely given Butterly a thought. Now he could see

(Continued on page 90)

Bad Man From Bitter Creek

By Raymond Schuessler

When Jules Beni fired that load of buckshot into the back of Badman Joseph Alfred Slade, Jules signed an unbreakable contract—giving away one of his ears!

JOSEPH ALFRED SLADE rode into Alder Gulch, Montana in 1863 with one ear of Jules Beni dangling from his gold watch chain. The other ear of Jules was tacked to a corral post near Fort Laramie.

Beni had been a big shot in his neck of the woods. He even had the town named after him; so it was inevitable that the two men should clash. The rising power and popularity of the newcomer incited Jules to put a bullet in Slade's back and finish the coup with two loads of buckshot. But when Jules dragged a drygoods box from a local haberdashery in which to bury the corpse he found only a pool of blood.

Slade, dragged off by his friends, recovered and swore to high heaven he would have Beni's ears for a watch charm. He caught up with the Frenchman at Fort Laramie, whipped him and tied him to a post. Circling Indian fashion around the struggling captive, Slade, who was an expert marksman, fired twenty-two times, and each shot took superficial effect. He finished the job by thrusting his pistol into the Frenchman's mouth.

Jack had more than the ears of Jules Beni to inflate his reputation, for the entire Overland route was familiar with his exploits. He had single-handed cleaned out the stock and hay thieves which threatened to bankrupt the Overland Stage Line.

But justice was only a thing of sobriety to the pugnacious gunman. When he was drinking, friend, foe and woman were pawns in his sadistic deviltry.

When Slade hit Alder Gulch his notoriety had preceded him and Jack made the most of it. Discharged from the Overland Company, he soon organized his own gang of gunmen and ran the town to his liking. Being a member of the Vigilantes, he demanded immunity for his escapades. He raised merry hell from Virginia City to Fort Laramie.

Strangely enough, Slade had a domestic side. He brought his wife to Virginia City and built a stone house for her on a hay ranch. Whatever their affinity, they were made for each other. Jack worshipped the ground she walked on; loved her best next to his debauchery and his black-haired, voluptuous mate loved him in turn.

It wasn't long before the Vigilante Committee decided that they couldn't afford to allow Slade to run riot any longer, for his gang was becoming too wanton. A warrant was issued by the Civil Law Court in Virginia City and Slade, surprisingly, responded. He stomped into court with his cronies at his heels, tore up the warrant and dribbled tobacco juice in front of the judge. This set the dreaded Executive Committee of the Vigilantes into action, and they issued a secret ultimatum: "Git out of town, Jack Slade, or take the consequences." The famous X Biedler, who helped clean up many northwest gangs, carried the proclamation to Slade. Jack was drunk when X told him of the decision but he didn't argue. "All right," he muttered, "Just another drink."

He had another drink, and another, and then he kidnapped the judge.

That was the beginning of the end. On March 10, 1864, the Vigilantes, six hundred strong, stormed into Virginia City. Slade, now sober, tried to apologize for his drunken orgies and promised to reform. The mob was intent upon retribution and ignored his pleadings. Realizing the futility of mercy, Slade only asked to see his wife before he died. As a messenger rode off for Mrs. Slade, the outlaw's body was yanked into the breeze, where it swayed gently in grotesque mockery to their promise.

When Virginia Slade arrived, her man's body lay cold and mutilated beneath the scaffold.

"Why didn't you shoot him?" she screamed. "He at least deserved to die like a man!" Carrying the corpse home she put her hero in a tin coffin filled with alcohol and guarded it through the winter. In the spring she buried him on the Salt Lake prairie overlooking the trails which he had helped to clear in his strange, belligerent manner.

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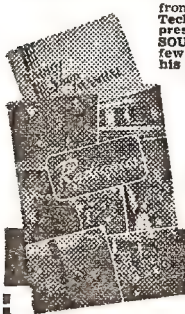

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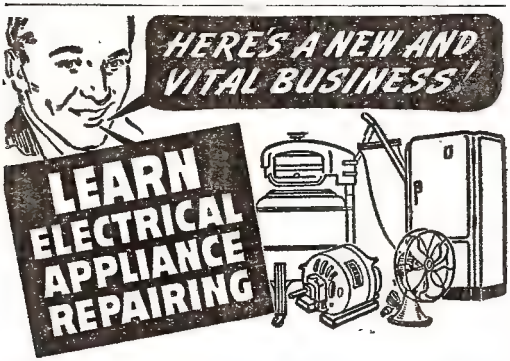

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(Continued from page 88)

how obvious it had been—the idea of the deliberate baiting of that trap must have lain fallow in his mind since its inception. He ducked, chucked another bullet from the .38.

To his amazement, he found that the three red balls were still clutched in his left hand!

MORGAN WHITE was reining his horse around. His Colt spat fire and he had to let go of the reins as the shock and pain rendered his right arm completely useless. The advantage of being on horseback was now lessened by his semi-crippled state, but his left-handed aim was excellent and the range was very short. He cut down on Duke.

Again the Duke shifted. Wheeling, he presented a sideways target, lifted his gun, and fired a last time. Then he leaped inside the smithy, sliding the .38 back into his sash. His right hand swiveled and brought up the Colt just as the smith reached for his hammer and Duke remembered that this man was another henchman of Morgan White. He fired with a snap of his wrist and the smith fell dead.

Immediately Duke was walking out of the shop, his gun waist high. He saw Morgan White, sliding from the chestnut, trying to gain the hitching rack. Three riders came in shooting, but now a lone citizen with a shotgun walked out and blazed away. One of the Running W men seemed to melt before the muzzle blast—the other went straight on through Cartridge without stopping. Down by the saddle shop a small war seemed to be taking place.

The man with the shotgun cried, "Come on! Let's bust up Morgan White's gang!"

Around the corner of the Corral came Ed Mosely, yellow mustaches bristling. He said, "Ole man, am I?" He held a rifle waist-high, finger on the trigger. Duke shot at him.

Fire came from the muzzle of the rifle and singed Duke's ear, but the bullet missed him as he sent one .45 slug at the Marshal.

Morgan White was leaning against the rack. His revolver came up, slowly, unwaveringly.

Marshal Ed Mosely, folded like an old blanket, dying.

White said distinctly, "Damn you, Bagley, you can't whup us all!"

Duke saw Peter Owle riding, blood on his face, coming to the help of his boss, loyal to the end. Owle had two revolvers and there was an extra gun in Morgan White's belt. There was a decision to make and Duke unhesitatingly chose to deal with the man on horseback first. He set his teeth, expecting to take a bullet from White's gun, moving as he had been moving since the battle began, aiming upward.

Owle held his fire, coolly waiting to get in close. One second too long he held it. Duke's lead caught him in the stomach. His own shot went wild.

Duke swerved, trying to get his gun around in time to stop Morgan White. He stopped, holding his fire, staring. White was bent over the hitch rack, arms dangling. He was dead.

Across the street, a white-faced little man with a .22 rifle stammered excitedly: "I—I s-s-seen him! He would've got you, stranger. He's a bad hombre. . . ."

Duke had never seen the man before. He was just one of Cartridge's nameless citizens.

The Duke saluted him soberly. "Yaas, indeed. Thus it should end, with justice."

He began moving down the street. He saw Jenny Carter lift a rifle and aim it. A puff of smoke, and suddenly the scene was changed. A stillness, like a blanket, fell across Colt Avenue. A child laughed on a side street.

Duke came on to the girl. On his cot, Dick Derring was nursing a gun he had never fired.

Gill called, "We got Dulle an' Orny Gray. . . . Orny was totin' a wound. . . ."

Duke said, "It's over, Miss Jenny. You only have to sorta pick up the pieces. You can take it Morgan killed your father, like I said. He proved it when he come rackin' in atop Mosely's story."

She said soberly, "You've delivered a town, Duke Bagley. We were enslaved—and we didn't know how to break loose."

Duke said, "Yaas, indeed. Amazin' ain't it? Now, down at the Corral there must be some more of thet good bourbon. . . . Never was able to figger out a way to make a profit on this here deal. I'm a failure." He smiled at the girl. She was already turning to the shop where Derring lay.

Duke shrugged, going down the street, swaggering a little now. The citizen with the .22 was staring at the dead Morgan White.

Duke said kindly, "You need a drink, suh. Will you join me?" He stepped over the legs of the traitorous Bo Butterly and reached for the good bourbon. The little man had not followed him, but was being sick outside. Duke shook his head, draining the drink. He scrounged about and found several more bottles of the excellent whiskey.

He muttered, "So it won't be a total loss, I better crack the till." There were some gold coins in the drawer. He took them—for expense money.

He went down to the hotel carrying his bottles. As he packed he chuckled to himself. The Duke had not made a profit—yet Cartridge would never forget him. He wondered if all this was recorded in his favor. . . .

THE END

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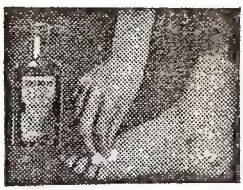

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The Branding Corral

EVEN though the early Western cowman and cowboy might have been considerably less superstitious than was commonly supposed, they certainly did believe in signs, according to James W. Oxman, a Kansan, whose father, Jared Oxman, was a businessman in the Abilene of the early 1860's. These men not only believed in signs, but they had the hard-headed business sense and Yankee ingenuity to get themselves out of a very bad spot in 1868 when the herds of Abilene cattle drovers were hard hit by the so-called Spanish Fever.

Oxman tells about it in an interesting letter to this month's Branding Corral:

Dear Strawboss:

One of the strangest buffalo hunts in the history of the West started out of Abilene in 1868 when that thriving trail town was hard hit by the so-called Spanish tick which had been killing off cattle driven up from Texas by the thousands.

The business leaders in Abilene had been anxious to make that town a complete market for everything in the cattle and livestock line and were badly worried when the stockyards began to get crowded with thousands of cattle and no buyers in sight anywhere.

Finally, one bright business man—I cannot remember my father mentioning his name—decided that Abilene must advertise. So he hit upon the novel idea of running a freight car across the country and making a wild west circus exhibit out of it. This man's idea was to load the car with wild buffalo, and send it on a tour of the principal Eastern cities. The sides of the car would be plastered with colorful posters announcing the fact that in Abilene—"fastest growing town west of the Mississippi"—there were twenty-five thousand or more fully grown cattle available for immediate sale.

The idea met with the immediate approval of other business leaders and an ordinary stock car was obtained and its sides strengthened by bolting thick planks parallel with the floor about three feet above it to the sides of the car. Then a party of four Texan cowboys and three California Spaniards, all experts with the lasso, loaded their ponies aboard this car of the Kansas Pacific Railway and were driven as far as Fossil Creek siding where the car was sidetracked and camp-pitched.

Within two days ten fully grown bull buffaloes were lassoed, but because the weather was very hot four died of heat and the anger

aroused in them by their capture. Three others became sullen and laid down before they got to the cars, and couldn't be budged. Finally, three were gotten aboard in good condition. Back in Abilene a large canvas was plastered to the sides of the car announcing in flaming bright colors that Abilene had cattle for sale—and then some! The advertising car bearing the buffalo was sent through to Chicago via St. Louis and won a great amount of attention from the public and from the newspapers. In Chicago the buffalo were turned out upon the enclosed commons of the stockyards where the public might inspect them at leisure. Afterwards they were presented to Professor Gamgee, an English veterinarian surgeon.

The advertising stunt was a big success and parties of potential buyers immediately headed for Abilene and were taken for trips about the prairies and shown the very fine herds of cattle there. Several excursionists were induced to invest and in a few days the heavily overstocked market was down to normal—and wild and woolly Abilene was back on its feet, socially and financially.

Steamboat Herd

Lew Dennison, a Texas rancher, offers an interesting anecdote concerning Willis McCutcheon, Austin, Texas, cattleman, who in 1868 conducted one of the most unusual cattle drives in the history of the American west.

Dear Strawboss:

The other day I run into a couple hombres who was augurin' the subject of whether any cattle were ever shipped north by steamboat during the pioneer days in the West. Well, sir, I settled that question pronto. The feller who once did that there job was Willis McCutcheon of Austin, Texas, who as a boy had accompanied his father on a trail drive up north as early as 1857.

Later on when he was older McCutcheon himself went into stock raising and during the Civil War furnished the Confederate Army with thousands of beeves. There was a blockade of southeast Kansas and northwest Missouri in 1866, but McCutcheon just turned his herd west and detoured 'em around the settlements of western Kansas into Iowa where he got good prices for his cattle. In 1868 he took on the job of driving twelve thousand head to the mouth of the Red River where he turned them over to principals of a Chicago syndicate who had contracted to buy them.

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Here's where one of the strangest deliveries of cattle on record got started. The beasts were pushed aboard waiting river steamers into hot, crowded quarters where they had no room to feed, water, or even lay down to rest. Just the same they were carried up to the east central portion of Illinois without showing too much ill effects from the trip aside from the loss of a little taller. I'd like to know whether any other *Branding Corral* readers have heard of any similar instances where cattle were shipped by boat to save them the long and risky trail drive up to the north.

Furs—And Claws!

A strong rivalry existed in the early frontier days between the great fur companies who were always competing among themselves for the custom of the Indians. Roger Chittenden, a Nebraska man, entertainingly details some of the unusual devices the competing companies used to draw the trade of the Indians to their own bailiwick.

Dear Strawboss:

Although the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, the Columbia Fur Company and the American Fur Company were three of the big mainstays in the frontier fur trading era, they always had a goodly amount of competition from smaller concerns who, like harmless, but nastily yipping mongrels, kept barking at their heels in the hope of at least getting bought out.

The American Fur Company was constantly engaged in a minor warfare against these pestiferous small outfits, yet the competition even from the little companies was often very keen. When a band of Indians would arrive in a section served by rival trading posts each post, would immediately set out to try to woo the group into its own fortifications.

The American Fur Company, in fact, made it a practice to post pickets who would keep an eye out for Indians looking for trade; then, when the pickets would make certain previously agreed upon signals to those back in the fort, special emissaries would gallop out from the stockade with their saddle bags bulging with tobacco and trinkets which they would use in an effort to lure the Indians to their own fort.

A keg was often the deciding factor in these races for the favor of the redmen and after the Indians had become sufficiently happy as a result of imbibing therefrom the traders would hastily take the pelts from the savages on to their own horses and start for the fort forthwith.

On one occasion a small orchestra consisting of clarinet, drum, violin and bells was sent out from Fort Union to entice the Indians into that post with their valuable load of plew and, oddly enough, the idea worked!

Whiskey sprees were common at most of the big trading forts and in 1834 Indians at Fort Union indulged in such a terrific bout of wassail, that the trader there, fearing they would become uncontrollable, finally was obliged to put laudanum in their whiskey. The drug put them to sleep for several hours and in the morning they awakened quite peaceably and moved out.

On one occasion Indians in a certain encampment in the northwest sent out a call for traders of two competing companies. The enterprising leader of the American Fur Company, Larpenteur, traveled the hundred miles over snow on one of the coldest days of winter carrying two kegs of alcohol as his "come-on" gift. He hid one of the kegs in a snow bank, then went on to the village with the other. After trading more than a hundred fine robes in exchange for the alcohol he went back and retrieved the hidden keg and procured sixty more of the robes.

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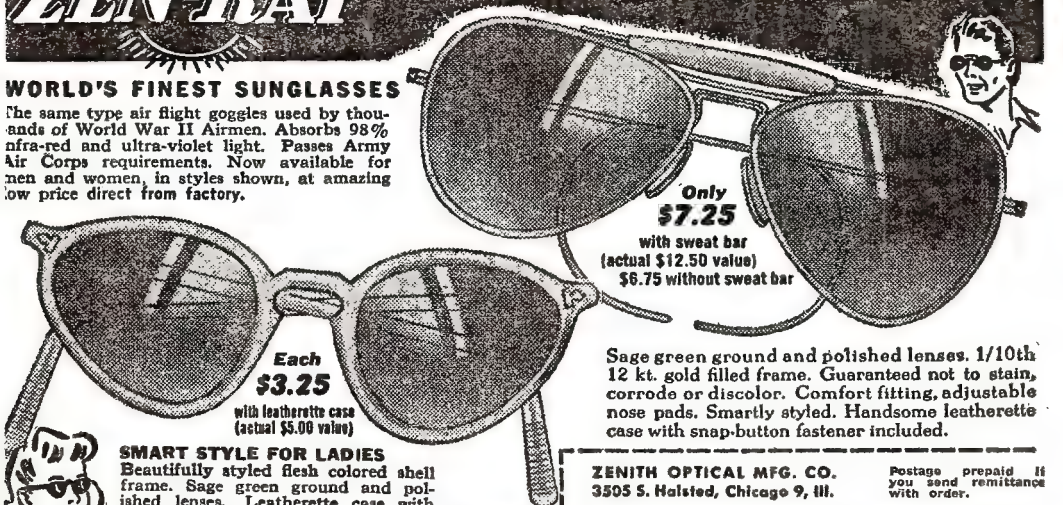

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Larpenteur's percentage of profit must have been enormous. For five gallons of alcohol, out of which the Indians got two royal drunks, the trader received one hundred and eighty robes worth thousands of dollars and then got the sixty additional robes in exchange for mere bits of cloth, beads, red paint and cheap small mirrors.

Larpenteur in this deal had "skinned" the Indians literally as well as figuratively. In the dead of winter he had robbed them of their warm robes, and when he left the camp only a few old motheaten skins, worthless to the Indians as well as himself, were in evidence.

The *bourgeois,* or chief clerk of a trading fort, was a person of rank and distinction in those days who, in addition to his substantial fixed salary, received a stated percentage of profits from his company. It was his job to maintain contact with the main offices, keep all the books, and hold under his complete rule and sway bands of tough, adventurous white men or half-breeds, as well as savages who came into his stockade for trading.

A fort was run like a small army camp. Employees received board and lodging free, just as a soldier would, and there were strict rules governing etiquette at the post table.

Distinctions of rank were clearly defined; Clerks ate at the first table with the *bourgeois* and dined often on better food than did the hunters and workmen who ate at a separate table and subsisted mainly on a diet of meat, hardtack and black coffee without sugar.

Employees were expected to buy from the post commissary, and many were their complaints of the high prices charged. Coffee was a dollar a pound, as was soap and brown sugar, and a yard strip of calico cost a dollar. Generally speaking, prices were many times what the men would pay for similar goods in similar amounts back in the states.

See you-all next month!

—STRAWBOSS

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UP THE TRAIL

THE dwindling ranks of those who fought with the early West's famous Indian-fighting Army were still further thinned recently with the death of Brig. General Abiel L. Smith, U.S.A. Ret., of Carmel, New York. As a young man, General Smith was breveted for bravery as a member of the troop which captured the notorious Apache warrior, Geronimo.

Although General Nelson A. Miles had unequivocally branded Geronimo as the "worst Indian who ever lived," at the end of his bloody career the noted chief, who for years had been a thorn in the side of the Army, surrendered without a fight to Lt. Charles B. Gatewood, in command of a small detachment of which Abiel L. Smith was a member.

All the men in it knew they were taking their lives in their hands when, under a flag of truce which the treacherous Geronimo might or might not recognize, they rode boldly into the chief's mountain retreat. There General Miles' ultimatum was served on Geronimo.

After a nerve-wracking twenty-four hours, finally came the sullen warrior's answer: He would return with Gatewood and surrender. Gatewood thereupon brought Geronimo and his armed band in, once more risking their lives to fend off a body of Mexican cavalry, eager to fall upon the Apaches and slaughter them.

Men like Gatewood, men like Abiel Smith, may pass to the Happy Hunting Grounds, but their deeds will live, as the memory of their courage and fortitude will remain enshrined—an imperishable monument to all their heroic breed who helped to tame and reclaim our great West.

In *Star Western*, we give you each month in vigorous, colorful fiction form, stories that reflect the valor and fighting courage of men such as these; stories that re-create, with their glorious blood-tingling drama, the West that was, and, in the hearts of those who love it, still is!

August *Star Western* will be published on July 10!

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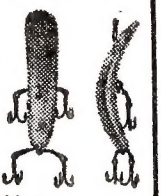

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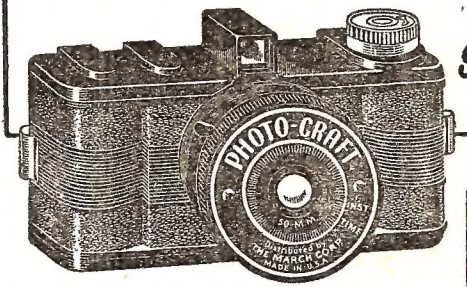

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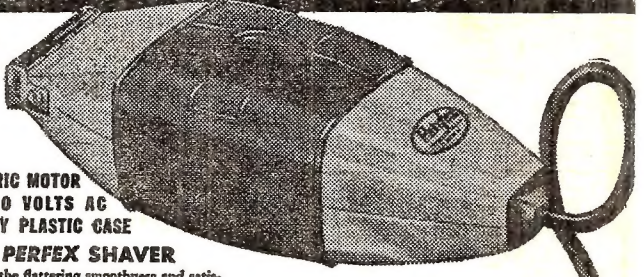

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